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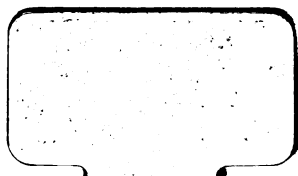
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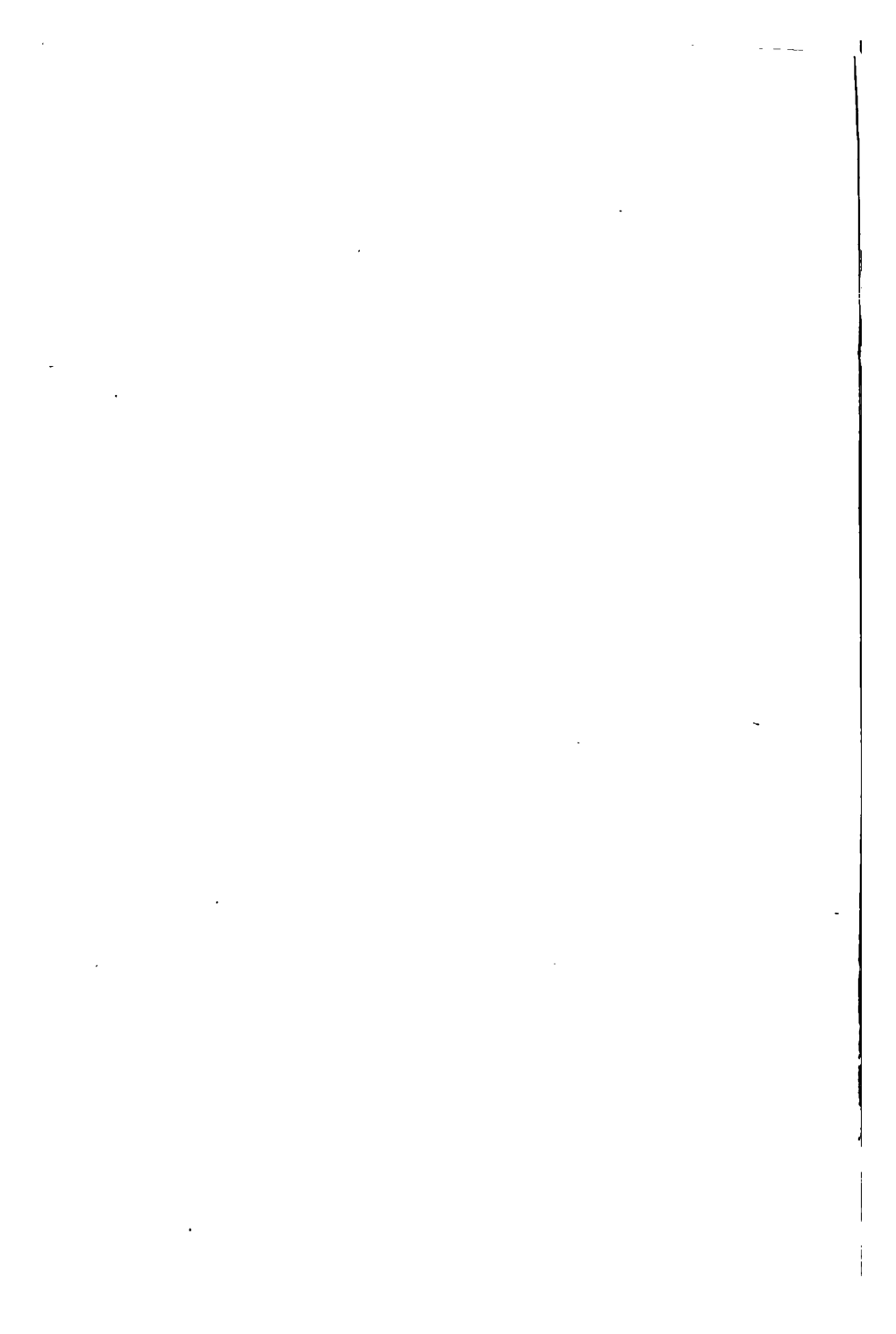
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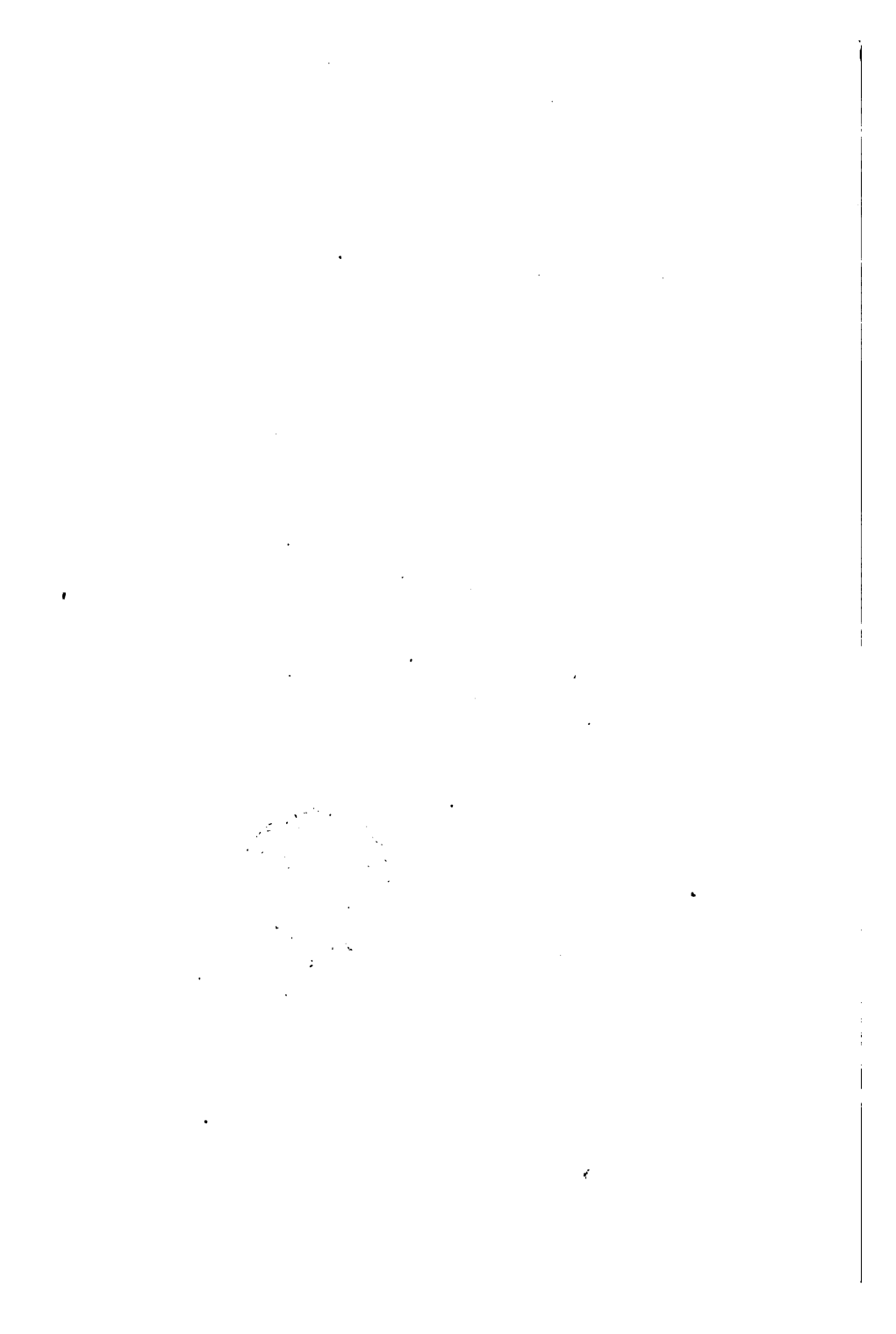


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THE BANNS OF MARRIAGE.



THE
BANNS OF MARRIAGE.

BY
DUTTON COOK.

AUTHOR OF
"Young Mr. Nightingale," "Hobson's Choice," "Paul Foster's Daughter,"
ETC. ETC.

In Two Volumes.

VOL. II.



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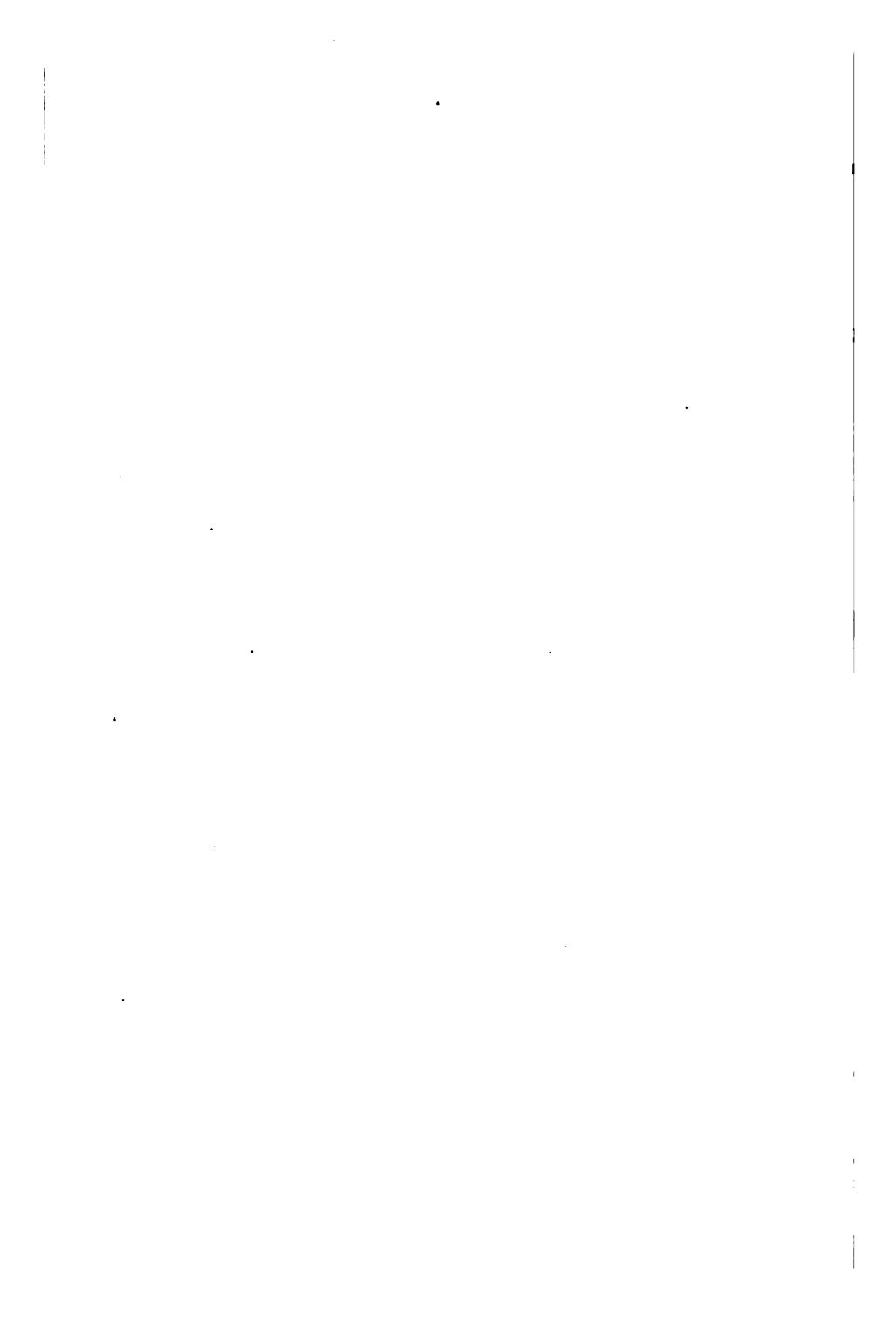
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MR. AND MRS. DOTTRELL.



MR. AND MRS. DOTTRELL.

CHAPTER IV.

BASSETT'S DAUGHTER.

It was one of the accusations levelled by his neighbours against the late James Bassett, that he had brought up his child upon wrong principles. He had over-educated her; he had spoiled her; he had taught her to think herself a fine lady. She was not like other farmers' daughters. She did not interest herself about the dairy. She knew nothing of the poultry-yard. She was not versed in the secrets of the still-room; pickling and preserving were inscrutable mysteries to her. She could not make a pie or a pudding, or a cake, or even a jelly. The old people in James Bassett's neighbourhood were indeed shocked. What was the man thinking

about, they asked ? Did he expect his girl was going to marry a lord ? What was she, after all, but a farmer's daughter, as her poor mother and her father's mother—and for the matter of that his grandmother too, had been before her ? Was Jem Bassett mad ? Was his girl to sit down all her life with her hands before her doing nothing ? She was a pretty creature enough ; no one could deny that. And he hadn't spared money upon her schooling. She had been sent to an expensive academy for young ladies at a fashionable watering-place. But that had only the more unfitted her for her station. She had learnt many things, no doubt. She could play the piano and the harp and could sing, and could paint in water-colours, and was acquainted with various kinds of needlework—tending much more to the ornamental than the useful. And then she had learnt French too—at least so it was generally reported. And there were even suspicions that she had acquired some knowledge of Italian. But upon these heads the information was not very positive. There were obvious reasons why Miss Bassett's acquaintance with foreign tongues could

not be brought to any very precise test in the neighbourhood of her father's farm.

It will be observed that poor Jem Bassett laid himself open to criticism a good deal. And when there are openings of that kind there is seldom any lack of people to take advantage of them. Indeed, there are many who have little scruple in making openings for themselves when such conveniences have not been otherwise provided for them. But although his neighbours did not fail to constitute themselves his critics in pursuance of the immemorial habits and privileges of neighbours, they were yet well disposed towards the poor man, and willing to aid, so far as they could, his orphan child. Miss Bassett was left alone in the world. She had no near relations of any kind. She might, people said, have married some time before her father's death. One or two young farmers had been known to cast wistful eyes towards her, and would doubtless have given expression to the tenderness of their sentiments in regard to her if she had but consented to give them the slightest encouragement. But they were

a little afraid of her. She was unlike the other young women with whom they were acquainted. They accused her of an air of "stand-off-ishness," as they somewhat clumsily defined it. She seemed to think, as they held, that they were not good enough for her. Very likely Miss Bassett really entertained opinions of that kind. She was pretty, and she knew it. That she was more accomplished than any other girl thereabout, she was also well aware. Of the further fact that she was weak, vain, and a trifle empty-headed, she was, perhaps, less thoroughly conscious. Fond of admiration, she yet did not greatly encourage her admirers—at least she never thought of aiding any one of them to develop into a husband. So the young farmers looked elsewhere for wives, and found them without very much difficulty. Happily there are very many estimable young women about in the world willing to say Yes, when a steady, substantial suitor puts to them a simple, straightforward question.

Miss Bassett had missed her chances therefore, or had thrown them away. She had been well

content with her life. She had enjoyed the reputation of being the beauty of the neighbourhood. She shared in the sunshine of good opinion that was awarded to her father. The people who were proud of Jem Bassett were proud also of Jem Bassett's daughter. They liked to see her gaily dressed, driving about in her jaunty pony carriage, for all the world as though she had been the child of a squire, or a member of one of the county families, instead of being simply the daughter of Jem Bassett, the tenant farmer. She had books sent down to her from a London library. She reclined on the sofa and read novels. She played croquet. She flirted with the curate. She employed a metropolitan milliner, and set the fashions in that part of the country. On Sunday, studying her bonnet, the latest Parisian invention, the congregation in the parish church forgot to listen to the rector's discourse—stood up when they ought to have crouched down during the Litany—so that they might the better acquaint themselves with the last vagaries of the vogue. They envied: still it was with profound admiration.

But now a change had come. Margery Bassett was to be nobody any more. She was the daughter of a bankrupt. She was left with nothing. For the future she must work for her living: she who had never yet done a single useful thing! But she possessed accomplishments—such as they were—and must now see about turning them to account in the best way she could. There was talk of her looking out for a situation as governess, or obtaining a place as teacher in a school. Still there was no desire that the poor girl should be hurried—there was an evident anxiety to deal considerately with her. “She must have breathing time,” people said pityingly. If they had said “crying time,” it would have been quite as correct. She took her father’s loss greatly to heart. It seemed at one time that she would hardly be able to hold up her head again, she was so bowed down by her deep sorrow. The neighbours kindly opened their doors to her, and bade her sojourn with them until such time as she felt equal to enter upon that struggle with the world which was inevitably to be endured by-and-by. Still

this was only deferring the matter. It was hard to be a tax upon, or to accept favours from people she had been apt, perhaps, in the days of her prosperity, to regard a little contemptuously. Yet, what else could she do? She had no strength of character, no self-reliance. She shivered as she thought of the future. She was very miserable. She could only sit with streaming eyes bemoaning her fate—ashamed of her position: yet, making no stir to alter it; longing to depart on her way whither chance might lead, and yet held in firm bondage by her fears. Then came in time the certainty that she was outstaying her welcome—straining neighbourly charity quite to its severing point. It was plain to her at last that she must go somewhere, do something. Public opinion was demanding resolution and action on her part. Criticism had been for awhile suppressed by commiseration, but it was wearing through again to the surface, and finding utterance of an unmistakable kind.

Then her father's executor, her own true and kind friend, Josh Dottrell, spoke to her, timidly

but very tenderly. She seized upon the method of escape from her embarrassments that he offered her. Hardly thinking what she was doing, she consented to become his wife, to share his home, and to rule the "White Greyhound" as its mistress.

It was an impulsive decision. Josh generously implored her to take time to reflect. He had loved her a long time—since he had first seen her, years ago during her father's life, when she was a school-girl come home to spend her midsummer holidays. He loved her with his whole heart; she might be sure of that. He would do all man could to make her happy. Still he would not have her hurried. He could wait; he had waited a long time before speaking, but he could wait a long time yet for her answer if need was. He would have her think well what she was doing. He was not worthy of her, he knew that; he was her equal in no way. He sought to disguise nothing from her. He was old enough to be her father. He could offer her but an inferior kind of position. He had been a gamekeeper, and he now kept a

public-house: that was the plain truth of the matter. As a boy he had worked in the fields. He was without much school learning, a homely, ignorant man, rough in his ways, rude in his speech. The home he could offer her was a poor sort of home compared to what she had been accustomed to. Still there it was, such as it was, and if she thought she could make herself happy in it, why, she would make Josh Dottrell very happy too, and, so far as he could help it, she should never have reason to regret her decision.

In his blunt, abrupt, and somewhat confused way he did all he could to make her think. But she wouldn't think, or rather she would think only of the moment and of herself. For the future, for the man whom she was about to constitute her husband, she had no care whatever. Here, at any rate, was an end to her troubles. Here was food, and shelter, and raiment for the rest of her days. She would not be required to work for her subsistence, to go out among strangers, to rely upon herself and her own exertions, to face the world and do battle with it, and wring from it money,

and position, and respect. She decided without a moment's hesitation. She had no doubt she could be happy enough as Josh Dottrell's wife. She could not question the strength and extent of his attachment for her. He was reputed to have saved money—to be well to do in the world. He would indulge her; he would make much of her; he would let her have her own way in all things. Already he was a kind of slave to her, followed her about and did her bidding like a faithful dog. Something of the old envy and admiration she had excited as Miss Bassett in her father's lifetime might accrue to her in her new position as Mrs. Dottrell. She could not hesitate. Besides, would she not escape from the cooling charity of her neighbours—cease to be under any obligation to them for shelter and support?

As to whether she should promote Josh's happiness in any way—would fulfil her part of the contract implied in her marriage with him—she did not trouble herself to reflect at all.

CHAPTER V.

THE "WHITE GREYHOUND."

"To be sure, it is main dull for her in Hengeborough."

So Josh mentally pleaded and made excuses for his wife. He could not bring himself to judge severely her peevishness of temper, her petulance of humour, her general unreasonableness, and lack of discretion and forbearance. He thought the fault very likely rested with himself. He knew his own shortcomings—he took the humblest view of his position. He was at all times a simple, unpretentious man—shrinking from self-assertion—in alarm at the thought of wounding the susceptibilities of others. It was true that in his younger days he had been reputed to be inexorably strict in the matter of poachers; for such male-

factors he had thought no punishment too severe. But that had been a matter of education with him; such views had become thoroughly part of his nature, and, in such wise, it seemed that all constitutional acrimoniousness had been drawn from him in one direction as by a blister; that a safety-valve had been provided for his wrath and ill-humour. Bestowing his bitterness upon poachers—whom he regarded as mere human vermin to be trapped and put out of the way at every possible opportunity—he had nothing but sweetness left for the rest of mankind. He had the softest and tenderest heart man could have. And he had a horror of that vague offence against the laws of society, which is popularly known as “taking a liberty.” And it seemed to Josh—and in this view of the case he was supported by the public opinion of Hengeborough—that his wife, by a certain arrogance of manner she permitted herself, by the grandeur of dress she indulged in, by what Hengeborough generally described as her “airs and graces,” was in danger of affronting the parish, and “taking liberties” with the neighbours and

patrons of the "White Greyhound." Thereupon, in his very gentlest way, Josh had ventured to remonstrate with his young wife—with the result that has been already stated, in the report rife "up-street," Hengeborough, to the effect that "Mr. and Mrs. Dottrell had had words."

Josh had been loth to speak or to stir in the matter, but action of some kind had been in a measure forced upon him. Complaints on the subject had reached his ears from many quarters. Certain of his friends had frankly stated that he was a fool to allow things to go on after the fashion in which they had already for too long a time been permitted to go on. Did he want, they asked, the "White Greyhound" to be brought to rack and ruin? Were they, his old allies and cronies, as nothing in his eyes? Would he compel them to transfer their support and custom to the rival establishment, the "New Inn?" They should be sorry to part from an old friend; but still they couldn't—it was not to be expected of them—submit to be insulted and outraged, as they had been by Mrs. Dottrell.

They had their feelings as well as other people, although they were, they flattered themselves, as patient and long-suffering as most. But still there were some things they couldn't be expected to put up with. And Mrs. Dottrell had gone too far—a great deal too far with them.

“What had his wife done to offend them?” Josh asked.

They limited the indictment of the landlady to one count. She had been guilty of other offences, but they would not now press charges against her in that respect; but she had spoken of the frequenters of the parlour as “sots.” Sots was the word. She had thought, perhaps, that they had not heard her, but she was mistaken. They had heard her only too plainly. Sitting in her bar, she had demanded audibly, “Haven't those sots in the parlour done drinking yet?”

Her words were taken down at the time by Skelton, the sexton, amid a very general feeling of indignation. Josh's friends put it to him: Were they to be called sots? Was it right? was it fair? was it decent? Was it to be expected that they

should remain at the "White Greyhound" to be called sots when the "New Inn" was prepared to open its doors to them, and heap compliments upon them, and call them—anything but sots?

Josh said he was sorry to find them so angry. They denied that they were angry. Josh said he hoped they would make allowances. They said they had already made allowances. They were not ill-natured, or unreasonable, or unfriendly disposed, Josh must know that very well. They had tried to drink Mrs. Dottrell's punch, but they couldn't. It was simply beastly. She did not know when the water was boiling or when it was only lukewarm. She had no discretion in regard to lemon-juice. She was without ideas on the subject of the proper proportions of sugar to be put into punch. It was doubtful if she even knew the difference between gin and whisky. But these things were all apart from the main question. Were they to be called sots? Would Josh have the kindness to answer that? That was their point. Were they to be called sots?

Josh said, certainly not, but he thought there

must be some mistake. His wife couldn't have used such an expression. He was assured that there was no mistake at all about the matter. Had not Skelton, the sexton, taken the words down? Could not numerous witnesses be produced who would, if need were, swear to the accuracy of Skelton's words? Then Josh said he was very sorry. He would speak to his wife. She should explain—she should apologise. Would that satisfy them? Unquestionably, said the offended guests of the "White Greyhound," that would satisfy them, but nothing less than that.

Accordingly, Josh had spoken to his wife, hoping she had not been heard aright. She made answer:

"It's quite true. I called them sots, and so they are; and I'll call them so again." And she refused to see any impropriety or even any indiscretion in this frank enunciation of her opinion. Josh expostulated, but quite in vain. He was deeply vexed, but he spoke with much tenderness and temper. He endeavoured to show that his customers must be treated with consideration; that

the prosperity of the "White Greyhound" depended upon its good name for hospitality, and the kindly reception of its patrons. That his character as a host was at stake, and that it was not for him or his to canvass the conduct of the guests of the house, or to be over-scrupulous about their temperance, supposing this to be within tolerable bounds; and, so far as he knew, his friends and neighbours were not addicted to excesses of a very grievous kind. And then he spoke of an explanation being due to his offended customers, and urged upon his wife the withdrawal of her words.

She would not listen to him. She lost command of herself. She gave way to noisy bursts of grief. She became hysterical. She accused him of ill-treating her, upbraided him bitterly—poor Josh, who would have died to have spared her pain! whose heart was aching cruelly, while he ventured upon his mild attempt at reproving her. She was without mercy for him. Was it for this he had pretended to love her? she demanded. Was it for this he had made her his wife? To degrade her in the eyes of his boorish companions, to make her their

sport and butt and ridicule? It was cowardly, it was infamous. And he pretended to be her father's friend! In her father's lifetime he dared not have done such a thing, or have thought of doing such a thing. But she was rightly punished for having listened to him, for having so far forgotten what was due to herself, for having stooped to become the wife of one so low and degraded and far beneath her. So her bitter tongue lashed her husband, while he writhed under and shrunk from its blows. She knew of her power to wound, and did not scruple to use it. Josh's loving heart was at her feet, and she stamped on it with all her might.

"God forgive you, Margery!" was all he said; but his face was very white, and his lips writhed, and his brows twitched as though he were tortured by physical pain.

"Don't touch me!" she cried with a scream, shrinking back from him. She stood between him and the door, and he was compelled to approach her in order to pass out. He only answered by a look, not of anger, but of pitiful reproach and deep suffering.

He went out for air and peace, and to think. But then came the thought that it was better not to think. Only he did not want to be seen. He did not want to be facing the world, or to have the world peering into his face, for an hour or so. There were tears in his eyes, they would come there, do what he could to hinder them, and he was ashamed of them. He had a child's ambition to suffer and yet shed no tears the while, to give no outward sign of the pain within. Yet he must have a moment or two to recover and compose himself. And he must do something. Idleness was quite unendurable. So he took down his favourite old fowling-piece, and began to clean it. But he was doing more harm than good. His tears fell fast upon lock and barrel. He was only rusting the gun. So he put it back and retreated to his stable, and set to work hard and groomed his pony. He was, it will be observed, an uncultivated man with few resources. The pony groomed, he proceeded to clean the harness. By this time he felt more himself, and could emerge from the stable and stand in the doorway polishing a curb-chain with all his might.

"It's all known up-street by this time," he said. He was for ever getting back to that subject. "There were listeners in the bar, and it's all over the place by this time, worse luck. They'll deal harder with her than ever now."

"I'm sorry to see this, Dottrell," said some one close by.

"Sorry to see what?" he demanded rather fiercely. Then he looked up and his manner changed. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Carmichael, I did not know it was you."

"Sorry to see this change in the weather, I mean," said the gentleman addressed as Mr. Carmichael, who was, indeed, the curate of Hengeborough.

"Has there been a change?" Josh asked dreamily.

"Why, it's been raining hard for the last hour—a very cold rain, too. I shouldn't be surprised if it were to turn to snow as the night comes on. It's almost cold enough for snow as it is."

"Yes, it *is* cold—uncommon cold," said Josh.

"It would be a pity if there was to be any

break-up of the fine weather just yet. It would spoil all next week's sport. They say we're to have a very good meeting next week. What's the news about Lord Hengeborough's dogs? Has he got any likely ones, do you think?"

"Well, there's a bitch called Henrietta—or some such name—I hear his lordship's very proud on. She's been winning a lot of things down south. I don't know whether there's anything hereabouts that can match her. But there's a many mean to have a try, I'm told. Squire Lattimer's very strong on his dog Lidderdale. I met him out on the down yesterday morning, and he's certainly a beauty to look at. However, we shall know all about it next week, I suppose."

"You don't look well, Dottrell," said the curate.

"I've took cold, sir, somehow, I think. It's kind of struck into me somehow. I must try and shake it off though."

"Yes. It won't do for you to be ill next week. You'll have a busy time of it then. Hengeborough's rather dull generally, but it will be full of life next week."

"It is dull, generally speaking," said Josh.

The curate strode away. A very tall, lank gentleman, who had a manner of standing on one of his thin legs with the other slightly bent, with his shoulders rounded and shrugged up, and his long, sharp nose pointing to the ground, so that he bore some resemblance to a crane, and, indeed, was known to some of the more facetious and satirical dwellers in Hengeborough as "Crane Carmichael." He was much respected in the neighbourhood, however, and upon him devolved, in consequence of the prolonged illness and great age of the rector, almost the entire charge of the spiritual welfare of the parish. His duties of this kind were satisfactorily accomplished; yet the Reverend James Carmichael had his difficulties to contend against. These did not so much arise from the spirit of Dissent in Hengeborough—although that form of opinion found sufficient expression in the place—as from certain inclinings and dispositions on the clergyman's own part. In truth, Mr. Carmichael hid within his coat of clerical black the heart of a sportsman. His tastes were drawing him towards

the field the while his duties were directing his attention to the pulpit. And he lived in times given to be censorious upon such matters. Of old the thing would have been of small significance. But now the ecclesiastic and his proceedings were regarded with a jealous eye. Even if he had been an elderly clergyman it would have been different. Bygone opinions and obsolete tastes would probably have been permitted and pardoned in him, and he might have joined the hunt, or gone forth with his dog and his gun as often as he listed, or as opportunity offered. But Mr. Carmichael was not an elderly clergyman. He was, indeed, quite a young one, and it was clear to him that, in deference to a stricter public opinion than had formerly prevailed, he must forego what were to him real enjoyments. He must shut his ears to the music of the hounds in full cry ; he might look at his gun lovingly, but he must not trust himself with it among the partridges. He must subdue his appetite for field pastimes and pursuits except in one respect. It had been decided that he might, without offence to any one, play cricket. Consequently, he had many a time

led the Hengeborough eleven to distinction of that kind. He was a first-rate cricketer. In that character he had earned the applause of the whole country-side. Yet the outlet thus provided for his love of exercise and his delight in matters of sport was barely sufficient for him. Cricket was all very well, but it excluded both dogs and horses from any share in its pleasures—and dogs and horses were very dear to the Reverend James Carmichael. He was inclined to think that life without the companionship of those admirable animals would be very little worth. Still he was conscious that these opinions of his must not be too openly manifested.

He was not a gentleman of any very brilliant intellectual endowments; but was yet very worthy and estimable in his way. Doing his duty thoroughly, kind to the poor, and watchful over their welfare both bodily and spiritual, hard-working, zealous, never sparing himself, it was only just that, independently of his skill and fame as a cricketer, he should possess the good opinion of Hengeborough. His struggle with his own inclinations was rather a private matter than within the

bounds of general knowledge. Yet it might have been noticed that visiting sometimes a sick cottager, or questioning a group of village children upon their religious information, he would pause suddenly to fondle a dog, or to inquire concerning the prosperity of a litter of puppies that had recently appeared upon the scene. And if he ever talked with a mounted parishioner upon the most serious topics, it was remarkable how his eye turned to the good points of the horse, critically yet lovingly, and how in the midst of his gravest sentences he would find time to pat and stroke with the air of a man intimate with the animal race, and taking pleasure in that intimacy. So, as we have seen, in his converse with Josh Dottrell, he made inquiry about certain dogs that were to run during the following week, when the Great National Coursing Meeting would be held on the open land outside Hengeborough.

"Had he heard anything? Did he suspect anything?" Josh Dottrell asked himself upon the departure of the curate. "Did he only ask about the dogs so as I might not think he had heard up-

street of what they're all talking about, I'll warrant? Yet he's always taken a kind of quiet interest in sport, has Mr. Carmichael, small blame to him for it. Could he read in my face, I wonder, what's happened? that there's something wrong between me and Margery? Well, he'll hear of it soon, I suppose, if he doesn't know it already. Yes, as he says, it's turning cold—cold enough for snow almost. Not so cold, though, as her heart for me," he added bitterly. "She never loved me. She never cared for me. She shrinks from me. She shivers when I go near her. I might have known it. How could I think that she would ever love such a one as me? I was mad to expect it. I was wrong to ask her to marry me. Yet I did it for the best, and I loved her, and I love her still, God knows." Here the poor fellow gave way to tears again. "Let it snow, let it freeze. I'd not care if only her love would warm, and thaw towards me, but ever so little. But that's past hoping for now. She'll never give me so much as a kind look any more. We've quarrelled now, and I've offended her beyond forgiveness. Poor Margery! It's not her fault. I

was too rough with her, and they that set me on are so ready to take offence at all she says and does. I'm sure she did her best, poor soul, to please them at first, and win their good opinion. But they wouldn't be pleased; they'd make no allowance for her; and it was all so strange and new to her, so different to what she had a right to expect, once. No wonder she lost heart, and then got angry with them, and set her tongue loose, as women will sometimes, the wisest of them, when they'd better by far be holding it as tight as they may. And then the place is so dull for a young thing like that—main dull, to be sure. They like a change, young folks do, and to see new places and new faces, and to hear tell of all manner of new things. It sets them up, and makes them comfortable in some way. I don't well know how." He brightened a little presently. "Yes, we shall be a bit lively next week. There'll be plenty going on, and the house full, and a sight of people out on the down to see the coursing. Who knows but that may cheer her up a bit, and her smiles come back to her again, and all go on well for the future? Let's hope so, at any rate."

He entered the house in better spirits. He met his wife in the passage close by the bar.

"Come, Margery, don't be hard upon me," he said softly to her. "I meant no offence, my girl. You may be sure of that. Let's say no more about it all, and make peace between us again." And he tried to take her hand.

"Don't touch me!" she said passionately. He was struck by the look almost of loathing that he read upon her face. He couldn't speak for a minute or two.

"The house is big enough for the two of us," he said presently; not so much rudely as sadly. "We need not meet often if the sight of me offends you so much. I'll keep away from you, Margery, if you'd rather have it so. I can make my bed in the stable loft if need be. I've slept in worse places. Don't fear that I'll give you more cause to hate me than you do. That needn't be, heaven knows!"

She might have been touched by a certain dignity of manner that accompanied his speech, even if she failed to perceive the tenderness that

stirred in it. But she hurried past him without a word or a look.

"Her heart's stone cold," he murmured. "Frozen hard. Her love's gone down quite below freezing point."

He was looking at the glass as he spoke. The Hengeborough people were all studying their glasses now closely, hoping for fine weather for the next week's sport.

CHAPTER VI.

THE COURSING MEETING.

DULL as Hengeborough undoubtedly was—as, indeed, it was agreed to be on all hands—yet it had its moments of liveliness: possibly in pursuance of the familiar principle of its being a poor heart that never rejoices. For some few days in each year, it was even the envy of neighbouring places. Like those creatures of the fairy tales, who, under the influence of some magic spell, are subject occasionally to a violent change in their natures, and are now human beings, and now mere beasts of the field, so Hengeborough was permitted at intervals to shake itself free of its habitual bucolic drowsiness, and to burst forth into quite metropolitan animation. When the Great National Coursing Meeting was held upon Hengeborough Downs, a wondrous

change came over the scene. "Up-street"—generally the kind of place a misanthropic recluse would choose to take his walks in when he particularly wanted to be alone—was now thronged with people. The demand for beds for men, and stabling for horses, and kennels for dogs, was something wonderful. Hengeborough was hospitable, with a sharp eye to the main chance and its own profit, however. It threw open its doors, gave up its parlours, turned out of its bed even, but it didn't forget to charge for these obligations when the time came for presenting its account. "You see, you don't come very often," was the Hengeborough argument to the overcharged visitor. Certainly the inhabitants underwent sacrifices on behalf of their guests, but the sacrifices were, upon the whole, remunerative. Moreover, it is clear that a man cannot be expected to surrender his house and home, and yield up all the comforts of life to total strangers, without putting a price on his concession. As to what became of the proper denizens of Hengeborough, when for a week the gentlemen and sportsmen of distinction in the coursing world came and took

possession of the place, it requires some daring to inquire. Their houses were taken from them; their out-buildings were turned into stables or into dog-kennels. The pigsties, it is true, remained. The man who is preyed upon, preys in his turn. Only, if the pigs had to quit their tenements to make room for human occupants, the question remains, what became of the pigs?

Hengeborough abandoned itself to sporting. The general talk was of dogs—a canine carnival prevailed. Hardly a topic was discussed, but such as arose out of the great coursing meeting: Who would win “The Subscription Puppy Stakes,” “The All-aged Champion Stakes,” “The Hengeborough Hill Stakes?” &c. How about Squire Lattimer’s blue dog, Lidderdale? How about Lord Hengeborough’s fawn bitch, Henrietta? Was any gentleman inclined to bet? How about the favourite brindle puppy, Adipose, by Apoplexy, out of Half-and-Half? How about the state of the ground? Was there a plenty of hares? Would the weather hold up, or would the snow come down, as it did two years ago, and spoil all the sport?

These were the subjects debated day and night throughout Hengeborough, with more or less difference of opinion, but with unflagging energy and interest.

The dogs certainly seemed to be having their day at last. They were fairly turning the world round, just as of old they used to turn the joints of meat in front of the kitchen fire. Their pedigrees, their prowess, the feats they had performed, the stakes they had won, their speed, strength, and courage, the kind of hare they most affected, the length and condition of course that were most agreeable to them, their form and training, and size and weight—all these things were in the mouths of men. No wonder throats became parched, and beer mugs needed replenishing; that glasses, with something in them, were passed freely about, and the landlords of the "White Greyhound" and the "New Inn" were required, again and again, to fill the flowing bowl until it did run over. Engrossed by the great dog question, Hengeborough, for a time, even forgot the important fact that Mr. and Mrs. Dottrell had had words, and the frequenters of Josh's house

overlooked the circumstance that as yet no apology had been forthcoming on the score of their having been denounced as "sots" by Mrs. Dottrell. Josh had his hands full, and his stables and his establishment generally. He was required to provide dinner for the Coursing Club: "covers to be laid," according to the conventional phrase, for no less than fifty worthy sportsmen; and praise was awarded to him by the county paper for his excellent catering and management on the occasion. The dinner was a great success. The usual loyal toasts were celebrated, and then came the "entering and drawing" of the dogs, which constituted the real business of the evening. Lights burned in every window of the "White Greyhound;" "up-street" was all aglow with the unaccustomed illumination. The air seemed full of jocund noises; the echoes of the festivity within-doors being borne abroad as doors were left ajar, or casements opened. The stable yard resounded with the trampling of hoofs and the rattling of wheels, while on all sides was heard the hissing of grooms, as though nests of snakes or flocks of geese were somewhere secreted on the

premises. Josh Dottrell's arm was stiff with drawing corks. He was so busy he hardly knew which way to turn. He sometimes forgot, for full five minutes together, that he had quarrelled with his wife. Unconsciously he was like Macbeth, when informed of his consort's demise. It seemed to him that they should have quarrelled thereafter. "There would have been time for such a word." There was clearly no time to think about it then. Still they did not speak; their glances did not meet, except occasionally and accidentally, when some unavoidable business of the inn brought them perforce together. For the rest they were completely sundered. Even the heat of action, as it were, did not thaw the ice that thickly coated over Mrs. Dottrell's heart.

It was trying for Josh. His coursing guests were given to be merry. They liked their joke: not particular about its quality or character, so long as it was a joke. Was it to be supposed that they would spare their landlord, who had taken to himself a young and a pretty wife since they had seen him last? They meant no harm. It was all sheer

good humour and high spirits. They were comparatively strangers to the place. They were not informed, as we happen to be, of the latest Hengeborough gossip—to the effect “that Mr. and Mrs. Dottrell had had words.” They did not know how hard they pressed upon the tender places in the poor fellow’s heart. It seemed to them that they were lashing him with packthread merely; he felt every blow as though it came from a knout. Their “chaff” about his marriage and his wife wounded him cruelly; yet he was bound to bear it and to smile the while. No sort of harm was meant him, but only friendliness, though its form was a little rough and its taste was not unimpeachable. He was not squeamish or prudish, as a rule, yet he shrunk from these pleasantries; he would have given all he possessed to have been spared them, though ordinarily he liked a joke as much as any man, even though its edge might be turned towards him. Poor Josh! When the guests of the “White Greyhound” ordered glasses round, and compelled the landlord to join them in a toast to the health and happiness of Mrs. Dottrell, he thought the

wine would have choked him. He was glad to hurry away as quickly as he could, so that none might perceive that there were tears in his eyes.

He had looked forward to the liveliness of the coursing week. It would cheer his wife up, he had thought. "Who knows but what it may bring back her smiles to her again?" he had asked. Her smiles had come back, but not for him. She had cheered up, but her view of him was not more kindly. She had taken her place in the bar, as became the landlady of Hengeborough's best inn. She sat framed and glazed there like a picture, with the snug bar-parlour close by, into which she could, when she listed, retreat from the glare of publicity. She was more ornamental to it than its best china punchbowl—than the ladle pertaining thereto with the Queen Anne half-guinea embedded in its silver; than all the glitter of its cut glass and solid plate—but she was not more useful. Not more useful, indeed, than the stuffed staring phenomenal trout in a case over the mantelpiece, or than the highly varnished old-fashioned print of the celebrated Eclipse coach "Stopping to Unskid," which deco-

rated one side of the room. Still she was looking her best, and that was something. Nay, a good deal. She wore a rustling silk, and a ribbon twisted through her waving brown hair, her neatest lace collar and cuffs, and a handsome gold chain winding round her neck. Certainly it seemed rather hard that she should be only the landlady of a country inn. She was so graceful and pretty and tastefully dressed, the position did not seem nearly good enough for her. She was fitted for a drawing-room rather than for a bar-parlour. Perhaps she was anxious that some such things should be thought and said of her. She did not pretend to be of much service to the "White Greyhound's" guests. She had done enough on their behalf when she permitted them to admire her, and posed herself for their contemplation accordingly. Orders might come to the bar, but she left others to obey them. She was too busy toying with her pet canary bird, or adjusting her cuffs, or replacing a truant and mutinous curl, or occupied about one of the thousand nothings to which pretty women are prone. Then she had the compliments and congratulations.

to acknowledge of certain of the coursing gentlemen, who approached her lifting their hats, not concealing their admiration for their young and dainty landlady, and pleased with the opportunity of interchanging talk with her, no matter of how idle a kind, of laying flatteries at her feet, and winning her smiles. These were the younger sportsmen of course; the elders were busy with their brown brandy and water and most elaborate dog-talk. And she made bets in gloves concerning the running of the greyhounds and the winning of the stakes, and was very happy for a time, not in the very wisest of ways perhaps, while poor Josh was toiling here and there, in the stables, the cellars, the dining-room, overwhelmed with anxieties about keeping up the credit of the house and doing justice to the patrons of the "White Greyhound." Mrs. Dottrell performed no more important duty than was comprised in occasionally handing a spill to a sporting gentleman who needed a light for his cigar.

Yet now and then, amidst all its excitement and occupation, Hengeborough found time for a word

or two of criticism concerning Mrs. Dottrell's proceedings. These were agreed to be open to censure. There was a whisper of wonder that Josh should allow his wife "to go on so." "It wasn't every husband who would stand his wife's flirting like that with all sorts of strange men." "There might be no harm in it, but still it was clear that Mrs. Dottrell did not know her proper place, or the duties of her position." "She could laugh, and talk loud and fast enough with the coursing gentlemen, it seemed, though at other times she had not a word to say to her neighbours in Hengeborough. They were not good enough for her, it was presumed;" and so on. Still, the bar of the inn was an open place enough. It was almost a public thoroughfare, indeed; for it was situate in a passage that led through the house from the street in front to the stables, garden, and bowling-green at the back. There was always some one going to and fro, or loitering and lounging there, especially during such a busy time as Hengeborough was now enjoying. It was not to be supposed that anything would be said at the bar

which the speakers were ashamed or afraid, lest it should be overheard.

A tall, smart-looking gentleman, in a velvet jacket and high riding-boots, came out of the dining-room and approached the bar, biting off the end of a cigar he had just taken from an embroidered case. It so happened that Mrs. Dottrell was alone at the moment, and the passage was empty.

"Give me a light," said the gentleman sharply. He added, "If you please," as he glanced at the landlady.

Mrs. Dottrell was coming forward with a spill and a smile, when she uttered a little scream of alarm and surprise. She pressed her hand upon her side, and turned suddenly as pale as death.

"Captain Thirlwall," she said.

"You here, Madge?" He seemed hardly less amazed, but he had more command over himself. "Good heavens, how does this come about? What on earth brought you here?" and he grasped her hand.

"Hush; don't speak to me. Let go my hand."

"This is the strangest thing"—he still held her hand with the spell in it. "Whoever would have thought of seeing you here!"

"Please let me go," she cried with a frightened look.

She let the spill drop. After a moment's pause he released her hand, took up the spill, twisted it about irresolutely, and then proceeded to light his cigar with it, keeping his eyes fixed upon the white face of the landlady.

"You're not glad to see me," he said.

"No; I don't know. You mustn't ask me. You mustn't speak to me."

"You've forgotten all about me."

"Hush, if any one were to hear you, what would they think? what would they say?"

"What do I care what they think or say?" he asked abruptly, with a toss of his head.

She passed her hand across her forehead; her left hand. It might have been done involuntarily, or to let him see, if he chose to observe as much, that a plain gold ring gleamed upon the third finger of that hand. He did see it.

"Married?" he said with a start.

"You didn't know it? But you haven't given me a thought—you know you haven't—for long, long past. But it's better so."

And then she turned, as though to leave him and take refuge in her parlour behind the bar. She sighed, and moved slowly, as though reluctant to go; expecting him to detain her, perhaps, and yet afraid to stay.

"Madge," he cried.

"Hush, you mustn't call me that. Don't, for heaven's sake."

"You're married—you're Dottrell's wife. To think of that! We were drinking your health after dinner just now. I little thought whose health I was drinking. You his wife? Is it possible?"

She did not answer. She moved away, turning her back upon him.

"Let me through," he said, shaking the door through which admission was obtained from the passage where he stood to the private departments of the bar and the bar-parlour.

"Not for the world," and she clasped her hands imploringly.

"I must speak to you. I must know how all this has come about."

"Not here—not now."

"Where, then?"

"Oh, pray go away, Captain Thirlwall."

"I won't if you call me Captain Thirlwall," he said with a laugh.

"What am I to say? George, then: pray go away, George. But you mustn't speak to me. You mustn't know me, indeed you mustn't. Why did you come here?"

"To run my dogs. Why shouldn't I? I suppose Hengeborough Down is as open to me as to any other courser? How was I to know that you were here? And if I had known it, do you think it would have kept me away? Not by any means. Why should it? I'm glad to see you, though our meeting doesn't seem to give you much pleasure, Madge. Why, you're as white as a sheet. There were red roses on your cheeks when I first saw you on Bayford Pier, the prettiest girl, out-and-out, in

Miss Tarlton's Academy for Young Ladies. Things have changed since then, it seems. You've forgotten me, and are married and happy. Yet, no, you don't look very happy."

"You mustn't speak to me like this. Not here, at any rate. If any one were to hear you?"

"You'll be out on the down to-morrow? I may speak to you then?"

"Yes, yes; only go now."

"You won't let me into that snug parlour, then? For shame, Madge. Is this the way you treat an old friend? Why not introduce me to your husband?"

"No, no; I mustn't—I can't—I dare not."

"To think of such a man as Dottrell being your husband! I can scarcely believe it. What on earth made you marry him?"

"Hush, for God's sake!"

Josh had appeared in the passage.

"The rain keeps off," said Captain Thirlwall in an altered voice, turning to the landlord.

"Yes, sir," Josh answered civilly. "I think

we shall have fair weather after all. But it's cold, very cold."

It was clear that he had heard nothing of the conversation at the bar.

"I'm afraid I must trouble you again, Mrs. Dottrell. My cigar has gone out."

With a trembling hand, her eyes averted, she lighted and proffered him another spill.

"Thanks," he said calmly. Judging by his manner you would have thought that they had never met before.

"I shall just take a turn and see how Hengeborough's looking." And he strode out puffing his cigar.

Mrs. Dottrell retreated into the bar-parlour. Josh, after a wistful glance at his wife, remembered suddenly that his presence was required in the stable.

CHAPTER VII.

HENGEBOROUGH DOWN.

It was pleasant to stand upon the wide-spreading, grandly undulating plain outside Hengeborough during the proceedings of the great coursing meeting. Even if no strong love of the sport quickened your pulse, if the coursers' hopes and fears were little to you, and the sentiments which are supposed to be latent in the breast of every man to constitute him a hunter upon occasion, and to stimulate in him at times an inclination for the primitive ways of his kind, had in your own case been greatly suppressed by constant life in town, or long subjection to civilising influences, still the scene had its exhilarations and excitements. The bright, light, keen air that came sweeping over the open down country was as different from the

ordinary atmosphere of towns or confined places as sparkling wine is different from still. It was cold certainly, and there was little shelter from the weather save where here and there a thick cover crested a high wave of the down, affording refuge for game, or a hiding-place for a fox, and defining the more noted eminences of the country. It was necessary to keep moving if you would prevent the wind piercing through your warmest clothing and chilling your circulation. On horseback it behoved you to follow now and then a course to its final issue. On foot it was as well to pace about briskly, and keep the operations of the day as much as possible in view. Even if the laughing-gas of the fresh air failed to cheer you, or the incidents of the sport were without charm for you, the scene had its picturesque attractions. A noble panorama of country; miles and miles of down land stretching out on all sides,—pale green in hue, for the chalk lies close to the surface of the soil out Hengeborough way, and seems to gleam through and blanch it somewhat—and fading into streaks of faint blue and tender grey as

the horizon is neared, and the sky and land melt and blend together; troops of cavaliers most nobly mounted scouring the plain as though their lives depended upon their speed; with here and there a group of long-skirted riders, in the trimmest of habits, with health-lit eyes, and sun-flushed cheeks, and profuse tresses neatly packed beneath the daintiest of hats, not less intent upon the pastime of the day or eager to learn its results than the male votaries of the coursing-field. Then the scarlet-coated judge, with his relay of horses, like a general in action, bound to follow each course at full speed, and as he does so to make a mental calculation of the merits of the competing dogs, to debit or credit points for "speed," "the cote," "the go-bye," "the wrench," "the trip," "the kill," and to decide, and to give, if need be, ground for his decision, which greyhound is to be called the winner of the course. Hard work, doubtless, needing a firm seat, a quick eye, a prompt intelligence, learning on the subject, and an iron constitution. A hundred miles or so ridden over upon Hengeborough Down to-day, and then

to-morrow perhaps a similar task up north or down south. No wonder popular opinion has it that the judge goes to bed for long months upon the termination of the coursing season. Add to these items, more or less attractive of their kind, the indefatigable slipper, walking and running miles and miles over the plain, the dogs tugging with all their might at the slips when the hare is sighted, as though they would wrest his arms from their sockets in their eagerness for liberty to pursue; the fleet hare winding and doubling to evade his foes, speeding for dear life to cover; the supple lithe greyhounds bounding over the sward in chase—the pace something wonderful—gaining in the straight, losing in the turns, their nobler proportions describing a large circle, now discovered, jaded and panting, over the bleeding quarry, now unsighted in the cover, wandering to and fro, dejected, disappointed, their prey escaped them, and their course terminating without “a kill;” an army of beaters, mounted and on foot, driving hares from the turnip-fields towards the slipper, a flagsman to wave the colours red or white of the winning dog,

horsed stewards of the course, betting men, trainers moving along with dogs yet to enter the slips, wearing their cloths and sometimes their muzzles, and with dog-carts close at hand, affording refuge for the over-wearied or wounded animals—ambulances for sufferers in the field of strife—furnished with spiced meat-balls, brandy and spirits of wine, leading-straps, sponges, food in tin cases, needles and thread, bandages, lancets, Canada and Friar's balsam, and other remedies and specifics for dog disasters and maladies; carriages, carts, picnic parties, heterogeneous masses of spectators, the whole out-turn of the country-side. All these were spread over and to be perceived upon Hengeborough Downs during the great November coursing meeting.

A pleasant sight, altogether, to see anywhere for awhile. But a singular and most exciting change for dwellers out Hengeborough way—buried alive, as town-folks said of them,—steeped in the dreariness of rural village life. Of course they made the most of the occasion, both as a matter of pleasure and of profit. Poor Josh was so busy at

the "White Greyhound," that he had little chance of seeing much of the sport. But he managed to steal an hour or so in the middle of the day, and, mounted upon his favourite roan pony, famed all over the neighbourhood for its amazing "cleverness," indulged his fondness for sport of all kinds, by watching and following a course now and then. Mrs. Dottrell was to be seen on the down, looking very pretty in her scarlet cloak, with a graceful white feather floating over her dapper black velvet hat. Certain Hengeborough critics—they were hard to please—voted that she was a trifle too smart for Josh Dottrell's wife—seemed trying to look too much like one of "the quality." And then they said she kept herself too much to herself, held apart from her neighbours, as though they weren't good enough for her. It was alleged that she had quite snubbed Mrs. Large, the grocer's wife, a good-natured, "motherly" woman, though a trifle vulgar, it might be, who had offered to accompany her in her walk about the down—not thinking it meet that so young and comely a woman should be left so entirely alone. Mrs. Large, however, had been

given to understand that her society was not needed by Mrs. Dottrell. Thereupon Mrs. Dottrell had by various speakers been pronounced to be a hussy, and nothing better.

Poor Mrs. Dottrell! She was unconscious of the offence she had given. She was happy—in a way. She enjoyed the spectacle to be seen on Hengeborough Down. She knew that she looked well, and was the object of much admiration. She had heard herself called “the prettiest woman on the ground.” Lord Hengeborough, Josh’s landlord, had bowed to her most courteously, and her heart had fluttered gratefully. People had asked concerning her who she was, and where she came from, and her husband had been declared to be “a lucky dog” owning so pretty a wife. Josh had approached her on his pony, venturing timidly to hope that she had seen something of the coursing, and begging that she would not tire herself, and would take care of herself and avoid catching cold. She had answered coldly, curtly, turning from him, and Josh, with a saddened face, biting his lips, had dug his heels into the sides of his pony, and trotted away

to another part of the field. And then she had seen and conversed for a long while with Captain Thirlwall.

He was in high spirits. He had hopes of winning the stake known as the Ladies' Bracelet. His blue and white puppy bitch, Theodosia, had greatly distinguished herself. He had even backed her to win for a considerable amount. He was flushed with excitement. His black hunter was streaked with lather from the pace of the last course. The captain dismounted when he came near Mrs. Dottrell, and, leading his horse, walked beside her for some time, stopping now and then to look about him, to watch the flagsman, and to mark upon his card the progress of the day's events. He spoke first of all about his coursing hopes. It was plain the sport was very dear to him. Was Mrs. Dottrell disappointed that this should be so? She listened patiently while he told of what had happened, and described at some length the admirable running of Theodosia. Yet she could scarcely repress a sigh now and then. Of course she could not be expected to take quite so much interest in the matter as he did.

She had been talking for some time with Captain Thirlwall. They had wandered rather apart from the coursing-ground, where the majority of the spectators were congregated.

"I must go, Madge," he said suddenly. "They're beginning to run off the 'All-aged Stakes,' and my dog Thunderer's in that. I must go and see about him. Good-bye. You'll be out to-morrow? I shall see you *then*, at any rate." He mounted his black hunter, and galloped off furiously.

Mrs. Dottrell stood watching him. Just then she perceived at her side the Reverend James Carmichael. Her cheeks crimsoned.

"Captain Thirlwall's an old friend," she said hurriedly, with an embarrassed air. "I've known him for many years now. I first met him at Bayford when I was at school there. You mustn't think it strange that I've been talking to him, Mr. Carmichael. It was only natural. I couldn't help speaking to him, you know. It would have been rude of me if I had avoided him, having known him so long a time. He was only telling me about his dogs."

She did not note that she was in a way accusing herself by these excuses, nor perceive how wholly needless they were. The curate was occupied by other matters. The presence of Captain Thirlwall, the fact of his long and close converse with Mrs. Dottrell did not interest the Reverend James Carmichael in the slightest degree.

"What a splendid day's sport," he exclaimed. "I never saw better coursing in my life. I call it magnificent. Don't you, Mrs. Dottrell?"

Then he felt a little ashamed of his enthusiasm. "I came upon it almost by chance," he said apologetically. "I was going across the down to see how poor old Sally Black is, down in the hollow, by Purrington. She's laid up with rheumatism, poor soul. But I couldn't help stopping to see a course or two run. It's a grand sight."

It was rather waste of time and fatuous work this interchange of excuses, which neither valued.

What was the curate's excessive love of sport to Mrs. Dottrell? What was it to the curate that Mrs. Dottrell had been talking to Captain Thirlwall? Their explanations were the involuntary efforts of

conscience to dispossess itself of a burden, to justify their conduct at any rate in the eyes of their neighbours. So they had spoken, prompted by a certain sense of having each done wrong. For the curate knew of his own weakness in the matter of his love for the pleasures of the fields; and Mrs. Dottrell was aware that her converse with the captain was, at least, open to the objections of the critical. If we happen to have a rent in our garments, don't we always go about miserably apprehensive that the whole world will perceive it, and fix their eyes upon it, and become as well acquainted with its extent and proportions as we are ourselves?

So they parted, each inwardly praying against the censure of the other. Yet, in truth, Mrs. Dottrell was quite unconscious of the curate's failing; while it never occurred to the Reverend James Carmichael to think that Mrs. Dottrell's interview with Captain Thirlwall was other than a wholly regular and becoming proceeding.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTAIN THIRLWALL.

Who was this Captain Thirlwall?

He was well known to the sporting world, it appeared; but the communities of other systems were possessed of little information concerning him. He had been described more than once as "a noble Corinthian" by certain classes; but the designation did not seem instructive or valuable to society in general. But then the captain cared little for his fame out of a particular circle. So long as he had the suffrages of the sporting world the residue of the population might vote for or against him, just as they listed.

He came, it was said, of a respectable but not wealthy family in the West of England. His father, it was rumoured, had been a clergyman.

But the captain never spoke of his relations, and seemed to be without any definite home; even that inferior kind of home which is comprised in the congregation of a man's kith and kin in a particular neighbourhood, and not constituted legitimately by a parental roof. He lived in lodgings and hotels, and was constantly moving hither and thither. He had been in the army, but had sent in his papers and quitted the service with a suddenness that many people had thought suspicious. Some unpleasant gambling story was alleged to be at the bottom of this abrupt change in his profession. But the matter was only darkly understood; no one seemed to be thoroughly acquainted with its facts. Since then the captain had been "on the turf," as it is called, and browsing on that mysterious pasture had obtained, it would appear, a livelihood of tolerable comfort. He was thrown among companions who, for the most part, were not particularly nice in their regard for a man's antecedents, or careful about examining into his method of life. "Did he pay his way?" they asked. "Was it safe to enter his name in a betting

book?" And those inquiries satisfactorily answered, it did not occur to them that it was necessary to ask many more questions about Captain Thirlwall. They pronounced him to be a gentleman. And a gentleman no doubt he was in some respects—in looks, for instance. He was handsome—albeit his handsomeness was of rather a hard and cold kind—with good features, a carefully-trimmed moustache, hair anointed, and arranged, and curled with much painstaking, and a well-knit, symmetrical, and muscular figure. His expression might have been a trifle less insolent and callous with advantage, while his voice was certainly harsh and loud. He was always dressed to perfection, without regard for cost apparently, but then he might be excused for liking to have his attire in harmony with his physical advantages. He was fairly educated, and although his manner was a little abrupt, still it could hardly be said that it was disfigured by any absolute want of good breeding. It was necessary to remember that he was a sportsman and had been a soldier; but these points considered, the captain did not seem externally to suggest much criticism.

How far he possessed a gentleman's heart was hardly worth investigating. Trust in his consideration or forbearance, reliance upon any supposed generosity of his nature, the crediting him with any natural warmth or kindliness of disposition, would have been very mistaken confidence. Any sacrifice of his own interests, no matter on whose behalf, was not possible to him. He loved himself too dearly to have much regard to place at the disposal of anybody else in the world.

He lived in a great measure by his wits, and it must be said for them that they appeared to be equal to providing him with a sufficient revenue. What were to other men somewhat expensive pastimes were to him somehow wrested into being sources of profit. He was to be seen on every race-course, betting freely, but no doubt heedfully. He had been singularly successful in this respect, though disagreeable rumours were current now and then as to the means he had, in combination with others, employed to secure the winning or losing of the horses he had backed or betted against. A splendid rider, he hunted regularly in the season,

and had certainly profited by his excellent judgment in horseflesh, and his skill in buying, selling, and exchanging his hunters. He played billiards admirably, and was a crack shot, famed for his success at matches. He was a public courser, breeding and training greyhounds, and had carried off good prizes at the best meetings. In fact, as his friends said of him, he followed "sport" wherever it was to be found. Just so. He was one of those men to whom sport is subsistence; who hover about it, and prey upon it, and feed off it, as vultures lighting upon a carcase; who are greedy, and ravenous, and merciless, and will turn and rend each other should there seem to be an insufficiency of provender for all, or a chance of any one benefiting unduly by its division. He was a man to trust as little as might be. Wholly unscrupulous, nothing was sacred to him that came into collision with what he conceived to be his own interests. Friends he did not, could not possess. A capacity for friendship was not in his nature, though he had an abundance of acquaintances of all kinds and classes; for he would have parted

with a friend as readily as a whist-counter—sold him instantly, remorselessly, like a horse or dog, had the sale been worth his while, or he stood in need of the purchase-money, let it be counted in pounds or shillings, or even halfpence. For love—how could such a man love?

Yet he had made Margery Bassett think that he loved her. His good looks and smart speeches, and seemingly tender letters, had touched and won her school-girl heart. He had been loitering at Bayford for a few weeks in the summer, between the racing events of the season, picking up a little money at the billiard-tables of the town, but not otherwise much profiting, when, by way of occupation and pastime, he took to making love to the prettiest girl in Miss Tarlton's school, as he had called her. Bribing a servant, he entered into a surreptitious correspondence with Margery; met her now and then by stealth for five minutes or so at a time, flattered her, humoured her, vowed that he loved her, and then left her, so that he might smoke a cigar and, over its fumes, laugh at her folly and credulity. The silly

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girl had been proud of her love and her lover, surrendered herself to romantic day-dreams, cherished her secret attachment as though it had been something inestimably precious, and then had suddenly lost sight of her captain. He had been called away from Bayford in the interests of "sport;" and the vacation arriving, she went home to her father's house, not to return again to Miss Tarlton's school. She heard nothing more of Captain Thirlwall—did not again set eyes upon him, until, as Josh Dottrell's wife, she encountered him at the bar of the "White Greyhound" after the manner that has been described.

It was at an unfortunate moment that this man appeared at Hengeborough, and constrained Mrs. Dottrell to take up again with the old fond, foolish notions she had nearly forgotten. She was not happy; she even fancied that she was miserable; she was discontented with her position, unjust to her husband, undervaluing his love for her, not rendering justice to his many excellent qualities. Her vanity was wounded; she had really suffered much: both in mental and bodily

condition she was reduced and ailing. Time, doubtless, would have alleviated her sufferings, gradually reconciled her to her situation, taught appreciation of her husband's affection, weaned her from morbid brooding over the past, and stimulated in her bosom interest in the present circumstances of her life. She was as a transplanted flower, that needed care and lapse of days before it could strike root and thrive in the new soil and strange air now surrounding and breathing upon it. For the moment she was inclined to droop, and fade, and sicken; still she was very young if not very strong. The plasticity of her nature would have asserted itself, and in time she would have become accustomed and fitted to the position she had, by the force of circumstances, been induced to occupy. She would have overcome the prejudices of her Hengeborough neighbours, wearing them out and living them down. It was as a stranger she arrested attention and drew criticism upon herself. By-and-by her censors would have become accustomed to her presence, would have exhausted their stock of

observations, and abandoned her in search of other subjects for analysis and comment. They might even have liked her in the end, and grown proud of her as her old neighbours had been "down south," about her father's farm. Meanwhile she would have been shielded and supported by her husband's tender affection for her. Altogether, the possible programme of her future life had not been of so very hapless or hopeless a kind.

But now this man Thirlwall had reappeared upon the scene, to take up again the lying tale of his love for her, to beguile her with his flatteries, to proffer her homage she should have known was but shame and insult in disguise. She was vain, and she liked admiration; she was weak, and she felt herself almost powerless against his influence; she was foolish, and she believed that she loved and was really loved by him. He was so handsome, so clever, so dashing, so distinguished—he seemed to her quite an ideal lover. And she thought, with a sort of shudder, of the simple, homely qualities of poor Josh, her husband—his inferior position, his humble manners, his bowed

head, as he stood tendering obedience to the behests of Captain Thirlwall and the other worthy coursing gentlemen, the patrons of the "White Greyhound."

She was not alone in her admiration for the captain. A kind of spurious popularity and illusory lustre became attached to him upon Hengeborough Down. There he was successful; and success is with many people a sure passport to esteem and favour. His blue and white puppy bitch Theodosia (by Themistocles, out of Theresa) had won the Ladies' Bracelet in the most gallant style. A ringing cheer from the spectators announced their sympathy with the captain's victory.

This was on the last day of the meeting. Mrs. Dottrell had met the captain frequently on the coursing-ground. Each time he had dismounted and conversed with her in a low tone, moving away from the crowd. She congratulated him on his success. He laughed gaily.

"What shall I do with the bracelet?" he asked. "What good is it to me? What can a bachelor do with such a thing? They'd better by half have

given me the money. They say it's worth fifty guineas. What shall I do with it?"

She made no answer. Her eyes were bent upon the ground. She was digging up the turf with her parasol. Perhaps she was in dread—or, it may be, poor erring creature, she was in hope—as to what he would say next.

"Come, Madge," he said, "one syllable from you, and you know what shall be the fate of the bracelet—upon whose soft, white arm it shall glitter. Only say the word, only give me a look."

He took a square, leather jeweller's-case from his breast-pocket, and held it towards her.

"You mustn't speak to me like this," she said, and she glanced around her guiltily.

"Don't be silly, Madge. Take it!"

"No, no, no," she cried impulsively; "we must part. We must forget all that's past. We must be nothing to each other in the future. I dare not take it."

"Not even as a parting gift?" But as he spoke the captain returned to his pocket the case containing the bracelet. Possibly, he had suddenly remem-

bered the value of his proposed gift, and shrank from the extravagance of parting with it, asking himself whether such a sacrifice was really required of him. "Well, it must be as you will."

"We must part, never to meet again," said Mrs. Dottrell romantically.

"No, no; I'm going away now, but I shall come again, and soon. The meet's by the mill at Purrington this day week. I shall send on my horse, and drive over the down in my dog-cart from Bankborough, where I shall be staying. You'll be on the road somewhere, won't you, Madge? By the Druid's Block, let us say. There we'll meet. Then I'll ask you once more whether you'll say the word and keep the bracelet. And then I'll promise to bid good-bye to Hengeborough for good and all; only"—here he lowered his voice and whispered in her ear—"you must make the same promise, Madge; you must turn your back upon Hengeborough too."

She moved from him with scared eyes and a white face.

He looked at her for a moment, smiling

curiously. He appeared somewhat puzzled by her strange air.

"Is it to be Yes, or No, Madge?"

She did not speak.

"Well, I shall think it's Yes until I hear you say No very distinctly. I shall be there, at any rate. Wet or shine I shall be waiting for you at the Druid's Block on Monday morning as soon as it's light. You'll come, darling, won't you?"

Still not a word or a look.

"Well, then, a kiss, at any rate."

"Hush, for God's sake!"

She sprang from him and hurried away. The Reverend James Carmichael approached. He was looking intently at a distant point upon the down.

"Did you see how that ended?" the curate inquired of the captain. "The brindle dog had all the best of it at first, but the red went in famously afterwards. I lost sight of them in the hollow. Was there a kill? I did not see them come out on the flat again."

"The red won. There's the flagman waving

the signal," said Captain Thirlwall, pointing with his whip.

"Bravo!" cried Mr. Carmichael, "Hengeborough wins again, then."

Mrs. Dottrell hurried homewards.

"He saw me. He must have heard. He knows all now. What shall I do? I'm a wicked, wicked woman. What must he think of me?"

She might have taken comfort. The curate had never given her a thought. Only she did not know that.

CHAPTER IX.

MAN AND WIFE.

HENGEBOROUGH had resumed the even tenour of its way. The sports were over, the coursers had departed; once more there was silence "up-street;" business was decidedly slack at the "White Greyhound" and the "New Inn." People had time now to turn again to old interests, to revert to old topics. They had counted their profits, rested from their fatigues, feeling a little depressed by relegation to torpor again after their recent abandonment to so great an excitement; now they had set to work to purge and to restore order to their disturbed dwellings, and to recommence the normal economy of their existence. For another year perfect peace would reign in Hengeborough. The price of apartments would sink to zero again, and there would be

no inquirers or hirers even at that moderate quotation. It would be no longer possible to overcharge a visitor; for what man in his senses would dream of sojourning in Hengeborough other than at the great coursing time? Hengeborough must jog on as best it might, amusing, occupying itself, profiting as it could, for another twelve months.

Josh Dottrell, like his neighbours, had now time enough on his hands. He was not required to interest himself solely about the wishes and whims of his sporting customers, to study their convenience, and consult their comfort. He had leisure to ponder other matters beside the credit of his house. He could think now of his own affairs—of his unhappy home, of his aching heart, of his unloving wife. As to that smaller consideration—the offence given to his guests in the parlour, the unlucky designation of them as “sots” by his wife—he did not greatly disturb himself. For a time, at any rate, Mrs. Dottrell’s error in that respect had been overlooked, if not forgotten—wiped out and lost in the excitement of the coursing week. The old patrons of the parlour returned to their accus-

tomed places, and their views on the subject of punch were now regarded and satisfactorily met by Josh himself. His wife no longer attempted to compound liquors or to brew bowls. There was an end, at any rate, to his customers quarrelling with the kind of drink they were supplied with at the "White Greyhound."

Josh had time, too, to observe his wife; not with suspicion, but certainly with sorrow. He followed her movements with anxious, tender eyes. He was perplexed, disturbed; he could not understand her: her heart was still ice-cold to him. That he knew well. They were still as far apart from each other as ever. They did not speak; they met as little as possible; they passed each other in the passages of the house without a word or a look. Into the bar-parlour Mrs. Dottrell now seldom entered. She remained alone in an upper room for the most part; sometimes leaving the house and taking long walks by herself, avoiding the village, and wandering to and fro upon the downs beyond. She was very pale and careworn, with a curious, pre-occupied air. Now she was feverishly restless,

moved hither and thither in an undecided, excited way, that had something painful about it; now she was very still and apathetic, with a dreamy expression upon her face, and something somnambulistic in her movements; then a wild light would burn in her eyes, and her cheeks were aflame with colour, which was yet unhealthy in its fierce glow, and would vanish as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving her as white as marble again, and shivering with cold.

"It's killing her, poor child," said Josh to himself. "It's more than she can bear. I must put an end to this at all costs."

He watched his opportunity. One morning she was dressed to go out, and was just leaving the inn. He stopped her on the threshold.

"One moment, Margery," he said in a low voice. "I have something to say to you. It *must* be said, and now's as good a time as another to say it."

She started, and held back from him with a cowed and rather a guilty look.

"Don't be frightened, my girl. I'll not, if I can help it, say or do anything to pain you; be

sure of that. Come in here." He led the way into the bar-parlour. She followed him with reluctance, and yet as though she felt his bidding must be obeyed. He pointed to a chair, and she sat down.

"You're not happy here, Margery?"

She looked on the ground, making no answer.

"I need not ask the question. I know, I can see you're not happy here. I was wrong to bring you here. I was wrong to ask you to become my wife. And yet I did it for the best. God knows I did it for the best!"

He stopped for a moment; his voice trembled so, and the tears had come into his eyes.

"I never had—I have not now—any other wish but for your happiness, Margery. But I went a bad way to work to bring it about, it seems. However, we'll do what we can to set matters right again between us. If you stay here you'll only hate me more and more as the days go by; and I could not bear that, my girl. It's quite bad enough as it is. We'll part, Margery; part while we're friends—I may say that we're friends, Margery?—before your heart grows yet colder and harder towards me.

I'll find the means somehow. If your happiness requires that you should live away from here, why, so let it be. You shall choose your dwelling-place. I'll never come there to trouble you; have no fear on that score. I'm strong enough to bear my sorrow, I hope. I deserve to suffer, and I shall suffer, for the mistake I made. I ought to have thought for both of us—to have looked at the matter from your side of the question as well as from my own. I didn't do that, and now I've got to meet the consequences. Some friends will find you a home, no doubt, if they're paid for it; and they shall be paid somehow. I'll manage that. Or maybe, you'll be happier even among strangers than you are with me. You shall want for nothing, Margery. I pass my word for that."

He waited, as though expecting her to say something, but she held her peace.

"I'll go on alone, as best I may. I'll bear up. Have no fear on my account. But you won't," he added, with some bitterness. "Who am I, that you should waste a thought upon me? Yet, if you

should ever find yourself thinking of me, let it be kindly, Margery—that is, of course, as kindly as you can. I never meant to cause you a moment's sorrow, though, in my blundering way, I've somehow managed to bring down sorrow on you. We'll part, Margery, and—and we need never meet again, unless you should ever come to wish it. Only, if you should want anything, or should feel ill, or should seem to wish to have a friend—a firm friend—near you, to help you, or to do your bidding, or be of any kind of service to you, you'll send to me, Margery. You'll promise me that, won't you? Only a line, and I'll come to you straight, however far off you may be. Shall this be so?"

She bowed her head.

"You'll give me your hand upon it?"

She gave him her hand, trembling violently as she did so.

"That's well. I've no more to say, I think. You'll write, perhaps, and make inquiries; and whatever you settle to do, wherever you settle to go, I'll be satisfied, I promise, and the money shall be sent to you regularly, as much as you may need,

and as I can spare. Perhaps more," he added, in a low voice.

He waited a little, and then went on, rather as though he were thinking aloud than addressing her, however.

"They'll talk about us, of course; they always will talk; there's no stopping some people's mouths, and do what I may, I shan't be able to make them hold their tongues. But you needn't mind that, Margery. You'll be out of earshot of their tattle, at any rate. As for me, well, I can bear it, I suppose. It won't seem much in addition to the rest. It will be the easiest part of the business to bear, after all. Besides, what can they say? what dare they say? Nothing really against us; only that we weren't happy together, and so thought it best to separate. They can't really blame either of us for that; it's only honest and sensible conduct after all. What else can they say against us?"

"You're not—you're not afraid to trust me?" she asked tremulously, in a very low tone.

"Afraid? Surely not," he said with a look of surprise. "What should I be afraid of?"

She answered with hesitation, "Lest—lest I should bring a slur upon your good name. They may say——"

"They may say what they will," he exclaimed warmly; "but they'll not make me believe that! No, no, my girl; my good name's safe in your keeping. I should be ashamed to doubt it for a moment. What! Because you cannot love me, because you cannot force your heart to care for me, I'm to think ill of you? I'm to suspect and distrust, and to look for shame being brought upon me? No, no, Margery; it cannot be; it's not possible. Have I known and loved you all these years, only to think such a cruel thing as that of you at last?—of you—of your father's daughter—of my wife? It couldn't be; I'd risk my life on it. You stoop to this—you, so good, and so fair, and so pure? No; impossible. I wouldn't believe it, let who would tell it me; though all the world shouted it in my ear, I wouldn't believe it. I don't fear to trust you, Margery. I should be a fool and a coward, and a most miserable cur, were I to suffer such a thought to enter my head for one moment."

She burst into tears, and covered her face with her hands.

"I've frightened you with my violence. I'm so rough, you see. Come, Margery, dry your eyes." He contemplated her with anxiety and alarm. "We'll say no more now, Margery; we'll look upon it all as settled. It shall be as I have said—we'll part, but we'll keep friends. There, there. I didn't mean to bring tears into your eyes. I wanted to make you happier than you've been for a long time past. But I'm worrying you with all this talking. My presence pains you, and the sound of my voice offends your ears. Well, you'll soon be quit of all that. Take heart, Margery, and don't cry—don't—for God's sake! I can't bear to see you cry, my dear."

And so saying, he left her abruptly, drawing his hand across his eyes. He went towards the stables. Mechanically he stopped to glance at his weather-glass in the passage—a habit of his. "Going down," he said, "and so cold. We shall have snow, I'm thinking."

Then he went to the stables and smoked a pipe,

sitting on an inverted pail, and staring hard, with a rueful, abstracted expression, at his "clever" pony, who moved about uneasily in his stall, as though he only half understood the proceedings of his proprietor.

CHAPTER X.

BELOW FREEZING POINT.

ABOUT a mile outside Hengeborough, on the wildest part of the surrounding down, were to be seen the old remains, known popularly as the Druid's Block. How the stones—one prone, half sunk into the ground, the other upright, yet slightly inclining towards its prostrate brother—had acquired this designation, it would be difficult to say. Some fanciful resemblance might be traced in their form—as they stood out, black and grim, harsh in contour, against the red background of a sunset sky—to the colossal figure of an executioner standing axe in hand, beside his block, upon a wide-spreading scaffold; but it was not clear that the name was really attributable to a conceit of this kind. They were an object of interest to the country round

about; one of the "lions" of Hengeborough, indeed, so far as it could be said to possess attractions of the "lion" class. Artists occasionally strayed to the stones to sketch them—where is not the artist found straying with his eternal sketch-book? Photographers now and then pointed their cameras at the Druid's Block, as though besieging, taking aim at, and about to open fire upon it; and picnic and gipsy parties sometimes met and encamped upon the spot, lighting their fires, boiling kettles, and breaking bottles beneath the shadow of the time-worn, weather-beaten, lichen-patched masses of stone. But, generally, they were not very much regarded, being far surpassed in interest by other Druidical remains of greater size, better preservation, and more complete design, to be found in other parts of the county in which Hengeborough is situated.

Wheel-ruts marked the down within a few yards of the stones. The nearest way to the market town of Bankbury, from Hengeborough, was, indeed, by this road, if road it could be called. Journeying to Bankbury you saved about a mile

and a half by crossing the green down, instead of following the winding highway proper—a firm, well-cared-for white road, that could be traced at intervals upon the hills on the horizon, like straggling stitches of thread upon a green coat. But then the down-road, with its deep ruts and high ridges, holes and molehills, pools of water after bad weather, and great unevenness at all times, was very trying to the springs of vehicles; while in mist or darkness there was little to prevent your losing the track, and wandering desperately upon the down. Prudent people found it altogether more advisable to keep to the well-defined, if somewhat tortuous highway, than to venture upon the “short cut,” which might possibly prove to be by far the longest road in the end.

Mrs. Dottrell wrapped her cloak round her as she turned her back upon Hengeborough, and advanced towards the Druid’s Block.

“Will it keep fine?” she asked herself, and she looked up at the lowering leaden sky, with its layer upon layer of dense grey clouds, that seemed to

brood over and oppress the open exposed country on all sides. It was a wild and desolate scene.

"Will it keep fine till Monday?" And then she shivered—not solely from cold—though the air was bitter and piercing enough. She glanced round her timorously. She was quite alone. There was no sign of a human creature near her. Hengeborough was out of sight, lost in a dip of the down. Not a house, or a building of any kind, could be seen for miles round.

"He said Monday. If he comes—and he will come—what shall I do? What can I do? I must go with him. He will make me go with him. Why did I ever meet him? Why did he come and find me out here? I am powerless in his hands. Does he really love me, as he says he does? as he has made me love him? What shall I do? What can I do, but go with him?"

So she communed with and questioned herself. She could do this with safety now. It was a relief to her to escape from Hengeborough, and, free to give the reins to her thoughts, with no need to keep watch upon herself, so that her looks or her actions

might not excite surprise, or create suspicion in the breasts of bystanders, ponder upon her position, contemplate her future. Escape was offered her. Her husband was prepared to release her from prisonment by his side—to give her freedom—to part from her for ever. He had said as much. He had opened, as it were, the door of her dungeon. Why should she not fly? And if she fled, should it be alone? or with her lover—with the man who professed to be her lover—with Captain Thirlwall, the idol of her school-girl devotion, whom she still loved, or fancied that she loved? Would not her severance from her husband sufficiently disgrace him in the eyes of his neighbours? If not alone she went from him—if another accompanied her flight—would it be so very much more for Josh Dottrell to bear? It would break his heart, perhaps, they would say. She would be accused of the ruin of his peace of mind for ever. But had not her want of love, her faults of temper, her petulance, her folly, the mischance of their marriage, broken his heart, ruined his peace of mind, or nearly so, already?

“Why is he so blind? Why does he trust me so? Why does he love me so foolishly? Why doesn’t he lock me up—suspect, mistrust, accuse me? I think I could care more for him if he cared less for me. Why doesn’t he help me against myself? I am forced to despise him when I see that he doesn’t despise me at all, and when I know I feel that I deserve to be despised by him, by every good man. I complained that he spoke cruelly to me, that he lectured and commanded me about my duties, and my negligence and my behaviour to his friends, and he was pained to the quick by my repining and reproaches. If he knew all! He was not cruel enough by half, he did not lecture or command me nearly enough. If he had really ill-treated, threatened, struck me even, he would only have done what was right. I think I should have liked him better if he had beaten me—I deserve to be beaten. But he persists in thinking me good, when I am in truth so wicked. What can I do but despise him for his foolish fondness, his weak credulity? I am so unworthy of him, and yet he addresses me so humbly, bears with me

so patiently, loves me so much in spite of all ! His devotion vexes, irritates, wearies me. He seems to be for ever thrusting his heart beneath my feet, and bidding me trample on it. What can I do but trample on it in the end ? He should know better than to trust his happiness, his honour, his hopes, in the hands of such a one as I am. I cannot love him while he loves me after a fashion so foolish. And then—then George comes, and almost commands me to fly with him. What can I do but yield ? And he will come on Monday ; and then—God knows what will happen ! I shall fly with him. I must, there is no help for it, if it is fine on Monday, and I meet him here. Will it be fine on Monday ?”

With these thoughts chasing through her mind after a wild and incoherent fashion, Mrs. Dottrell advanced towards the Druid's Block, in the centre of the down. She was perplexed, distracted ; had wrought herself into a highly nervous state by the persistence with which she had surrendered herself to reflection. People who are little given to thought find that application to it, even for a brief

period, has rather a bewildering effect. She stood still, pressing her hand upon her heart as though to stay its violent palpitation. She was looking towards Hengeborough, as it seemed; but she was not, in truth, heeding what she gazed at.

A figure emerged from behind the taller stone. Mrs. Dottrell uttered a little scream of alarm.

"It's not Monday yet. Don't come near me!" she gasped.

"I've startled you, I fear," said the Reverend James Carmichael.

Mrs. Dottrell endeavoured to compose herself. She murmured something about not expecting to see any one there; about being easily frightened, the place being so very lonely, and so on.

She did not perceive that the curate was quite as much embarrassed and ill at ease as she was. He was smoking a short black pipe, which he hurriedly plucked from his mouth and thrust into his pocket. Opinion in Hengeborough was strongly opposed to indulgence in tobacco on the part of a clergyman.

"I got behind the big stone to be out of the

way of the wind," said Mr. Carmichael, laughing uncomfortably. "I sometimes walk up here in the afternoon as a sort of constitutional, and now and then treat myself to a pipe. It's an old Oxford trick of mine—smoking, and I find it hard to break myself of it altogether. I'm fond of walking about on these downs; but it's almost too cold to-day to be pleasant. It's a bitter wind to-day. Don't you find it so, Mrs. Dottrell? But you are fond of braving the weather on the downs, I fancy?"

She answered—she hardly knew what. She was frightened—ashamed. It seemed to her that the curate regarded her with suspicion; that his words meant more than they seemed to mean. She shrunk from his observation. She read in his eyes reproaches, accusation, condemnation. He knew her secret, she thought. He had detected her guilty love, rightly estimated her, judged her to be the sinful woman she knew herself in truth to be, pierced through the mask of fair repute she wore before her husband and her neighbours, and perceived her real falseness, and wickedness, and worthlessness. He knew the reason of her walks

upon the downs, had seen her converse with Captain Thirlwall, was aware possibly of her tryst by the Druid's Block, and the elopement that had been planned for the following Monday.

She was wrong, however. There were no such thoughts as these in the breast of Mr. Carmichael. It was only her own conscience that was looking at her out of his eyes, rebuking and censuring her for the sin she meditated, for the errors she had already committed, and of which she knew herself to be guilty.

Even if he did not really condemn her—and his words and manner, as she further noted them, certainly could not be wrested into signifying so much—still she felt there was a sort of punishment for her in his bearing towards her; he was so gentle, and kindly, and respectful. There was something painful to her in his presumption of her goodness. She did not deserve that he should thus address her. There was something fraudulent in her reception of his courtesy, seeing how little she really merited it. She was extorting his regard under false pretences. If he knew her real character,

she was wholly unworthy of his kindness. He was bound to shun her—to shake off the dust of his garments and to fly from her. So much was due to the really honest, and deserving, and reputable among his congregation. Some difference was necessary in his treatment of them and of her. She was wicked: he was treating her as though she were righteous in conduct. She was pained and frightened at his mistaking so greatly.

He walked back with her to Hengeborough, talking kindly and pleasantly all the way. He might be deficient in perceptive power, but he was not really wanting in sense. He did not lecture as from a pulpit, but in plain words, very simply and directly; as a man to whom religious duty is truly precious at heart. He addressed her not authoritatively or dictatorially, but as one erring creature might speak to another—seeking aid, and comfort, and support, yet imparting these by the very fact of exposing his own need of them. His words were few, yet somehow they were greatly to the purpose. He did not speak to her so much of religion as it is proclaimed in churches; he rather

exhorted her to conscientiousness and dutifulness of life by avowing his own aspirations thitherward, and confessing how far his own conduct fell ever short of his desires and his hopes. It was by a mere accident they lighted upon this topic, and they discussed it at no great length. He seemed reluctant to assume the privileges of right pertaining to his clerical character; yet he dropped a few words, not of a sermonising kind, but simply and colloquially expressed, upon the matter of man's obligations to his fellows, of contentment with the state of life to which he is called, and of the wide field of duty open to him in what might seem to be the most confined and restricted of positions. Finally, he hinted that there was work enough to be done in Hengeborough to those who would bring earnest hearts to the task—sick to tend, and naked to clothe, and poor to help, and ignorant to teach, and so on.

He might not be a very brilliant person, yet he was thoroughly sensible, and a good man in his way. He did not know the real ailments of his companion—how terribly she was beset with temp-

tation, how distressed by doubts, how weak she was, how near she had approached a fatal brink, how imminent was her peril of falling, how little capable she was of aiding and saving herself. Yet, unconsciously, he succoured her, bound up the wounds of her spirit, and soothed the aching of her heart. He wrested her thoughts back into healthy channels—hindered them from running away hurriedly to perdition. He let her see that life was many-sided; had interests potent enough, yet arising in no way out of mere passion. He showed that though a man's hopes of happiness might fail him one by one, yet he had duties to perform, not without their value or reward, and still enough to make life dear to him. He did not say these things in so many words; but the few hints on the subject he let fall from time to time—wholly imperceptive of their close application to the case of her whom he addressed—awoke very eloquent and pregnant echoes in her heart. He left her softened—curiously moved. Leaving him, there were tears in her eyes.

Yet, returning to her own room in her husband's

house, she busied herself in packing up her few valuables, and making preparation as for flight.

"If it keeps fine until Monday!" she said. She shivered, and then looked at herself in the glass, contemplating with some alarm the strange pallor of her cheeks, the hollows round her eyes, the new wanness of her face.

Josh, meanwhile, was studying his weather-glass. It had been a fixture in the inn, was something of a novelty to him, and a great source of interest and solace to him.

"Going down rapidly," he said. "We shall have bad weather, I'm thinking. Below freezing point last night. And the sky as black as ink and as heavy as lead. How cold the house is—cold as poor Margery's heart towards me!" he added, with a deep sigh. "Well, well, she'll think better of me, maybe, when she's gone from here—when she's rid of my presence. At least, she'll believe I did it all for the best, that I had her happiness at heart, though I failed so miserably to make her happy, poor soul!"

CHAPTER XI.

MARGERY.

ON Sunday morning Mrs. Dottrell was seen at church. She was alone : Josh was detained at home by the necessities of his calling. She wore a thick veil, yet, in spite of this, it seemed to her neighbours that they could detect her paleness—that she looked far from well. There was about her an air of suffering, they thought ; her gait was feeble, her hands trembled, and she crouched down in her pew, as was not her wont

Mr. Carmichael preached—a simple and somewhat brief discourse, which, it must be said, had been delivered on a previous occasion from the pulpit of Hengeborough Church. The curate was somewhat chary in the matter of original composition.

Mrs. Dottrell, however, found herself strangely moved by the clergyman's words. He would have been much amazed, probably, had he known how effectually his efforts had accomplished their end in the heart of this one of his congregation, at any rate.

But he preached from a Volume abounding in words of tender consolation and encouragement, hope and comfort, and pity, relieving the afflicted, inviting to penitence, promising the remission of sins.

It was bitterly cold and draughty in Hengeborough Church, yet one of the curate's auditors followed his words with unflagging interest and attention.

As the congregation streamed from the church they found the ground quite white, and the air thick with falling snow. The sound of their foot-falls was muffled, the roads were slippery. There was a little surprised gossiping in the porch: comment upon the early arrival of winter. "We shall have a hard time of it this Christmas," was the opinion generally expressed.

Josh was standing in the doorway of the "White Greyhound," looking rather anxiously "up-street" towards the church.

"Take care," he said, as he saw his wife approaching; and he went out to meet her. She was walking timorously and somewhat feebly. "Take care how you go. It's very slippery. Lean on me, Margery. How cold your hands are! But that's not so surprising, is it, considering? Quite a heavy fall of snow, isn't it? Don't be frightened, Margery. How you're trembling, my dear! But you'll be home and in front of the fire in a minute. There's a famous fire in the bar-parlour. Let me shake off the snow from your cloak. Come in, my dear, out of the way of the draught."

"It *is* cold," she said faintly, as she held her feet to the fire. "Will it last, do you think?"

"The snow? Yes, all night—hardly a doubt of it. I said this morning that we should have snow before sunset. We've got it now, and no mistake."

"Thank God!" she said, with a strange earnestness.

He looked at her in some surprise.

"I was praying for fine weather last week——" she began.

"Surely," he interposed, "we wanted it for the coursing. And we had it, too, luckily."

"Now," she said passionately, "I pray that it may go on snowing for days and days—for weeks—for months. I never want it to be fine again."

"Why, Margery, what's come to you?" He was amazed at her strange, wild air—struck by something very unusual in the tone of her voice.

She burst into tears. But what surprised him still more was her convulsive grasp of his hand.

"Don't leave me, Josh," she sobbed. "And pity me, pity me!"

"Why, Margery, you're safe now. I see, you've been frightened by this rough weather. It was too cold for you to be out. You should have stayed at home by the fire. There, there, Margery—don't cry, my girl; no harm can come to you now.

You'll be better, you'll be yourself again, presently."

And then, he thought with a pang, she would shrink from him again—would drive him from her side by her angry looks and bitter words.

"Don't leave me, Josh. Don't let me be taken from you." She was clinging to him—hiding her face in his breast. The change in her manner bewildered him exceedingly. "Has the poor soul lost her wits?" he asked himself. Yet could he wish her reason to return to her, if it was only to bring back again her dread and dislike of him? Very tenderly he supported her—indeed, but for his stout arm circling her she would have fallen—the while he sought to soothe her fears, as he would have tended a delicate child frightened out of its reason.

"Pity me, Josh," she went on in a low voice broken by her sobs. "Don't leave me. Let me stay with you. Let me be by your side. I'll try to love you. Indeed I will. I do love you, Josh; I do indeed. Don't drive me from you, don't speak cruelly to me, or you'll kill me, Josh. I'll do

all you tell me. I'll study your wishes in everything. I'll be a good and obedient wife—at least, I'll try to be so—if you'll only stay by my side and help me. Save me from myself, and from—from him. If you knew how weak I am, how foolish, how helpless, and, God help me! how sinful. If you knew how you ought to despise me, to condemn and hate me. If you knew how much you had to forgive, and yet how unworthy—how wholly unworthy I am of your forgiveness—of one kind word from you. Heaven help me! I don't deserve to hold your hand like this. I'm a wicked, wicked woman, and I can never dare to hope for your love any more."

"Poor soul," said Josh, "she's shrammed with the cold. She's daft with her fear. What can you do, my dear, or what can you ever have done, that I cannot forgive?"

He bent down his head and kissed her tenderly. She gave a little sobbing scream and sought to release herself from his grasp. Josh turned pale with a recurrence of his old fears. Was she shrinking from him again? No, she escaped from his

arms only to throw herself on her knees at his feet, and in broken penitential tones to implore once more his pity and his forgiveness.

He lifted her up and pressed her to his heart.

"Don't let me be taken from you, husband," she murmured.

"I'd like to see the man who would try on such a game as that," said Josh with simple sturdiness.

She smiled wanly and feebly. Yet Josh thought he had never seen a prettier look upon her face. He could read in her eyes what he had never read there before. His wife loved him.

His sudden joy, however, had speedily to give way to alarm. She had fainted in his arms. By-and-by she recovered a little, but before nightfall she had fainted again. Josh sent for medical advice, and carried her upstairs. "She weighs a mere nothing," he said. The doctor prescribed care, and rest, and perfect quiet. The patient was suffering from over-excitement, he said, and was in a weakly state. He undertook to bring her round again shortly, however, if only his instructions were carefully attended to.

"Strange," said Josh, as he looked at his thermometer meditatively. "My Margery's heart began to warm towards me just when the glass went down below freezing point. That's what people would call an odd coincidence, I suppose."

CHAPTER XII.

THE DRUID'S BLOCK.

“A ‘DESPERD’ (desperate) time for sheep.” That was the latest dictum of the Hengeborough folks. The snow was very thick upon the downs. The neighbourhood had not known of such a fall for some years—not before Christmas. There was a stop put to all farming operations. The agriculturists looked at each other ruefully enough. The labourers were hard at work breaking up the ice in the cattle-ponds, and digging out the snow from the highway. All traffic had ceased. Even communication with the town of Bankbury was interrupted, and the old postman could not bring over the letters to Hengeborough. For awhile the district had to dispense with all news from London, and to forego the

enjoyment of its correspondence. The place was blockaded by the snow, drifted here and there into great mounds, like the gun batteries of a besieging enemy. The down was an Arctic Ocean.

If it was a desperate time for the sheep, it was certainly bad enough for the shepherds. The cold was terrible. A piercing wind, freighted, as it were, with particles of ice, swept over the plain. Nature's face was hidden beneath a white mask. Landmarks were buried, pathways lost. A mantle of snow shrouded all things. A false step, and a man might wander from his way, or plunge headlong into a drift. Even Squire Lattimer's shepherd, an old man who knew the country well—he had never left it for a day throughout his long life—had been in strange peril. He had been lost upon the down, and had been by mere chance found, as it were, at death's door, breast deep in snow, with frozen beard and hair, and limbs paralysed by the cold. He had been carried on men's shoulders into the "White Greyhound," helpless, speechless, and insensible. He had been plunged into a warm bath and rubbed with brandy. He recovered after

awhile, but his life had been despaired of. His first words had been wild and incoherent enough. He spoke of people who had been dead long since, calling to them, imploring them to aid him in his trouble. He raved about the sheep, and the cruel fate that had befallen them. He deprecated the anger of his master, the squire. To think that such a misfortune should have happened to him, the best shepherd thereabout! He had seen his sheep freezing to death, and dying of hunger under his very eyes; and he had been powerless to help them. It had been terrible, indeed. Then, "shrammed" with the cold, light-headed, doing he hardly knew what, he had wandered forth in quest of straw for his charges, and more hurdles to screen them from the wind, and provender and help of some kind. How he came to lose his way he did not know. But there had been sounds ringing in his ears, voices calling to him, mysterious visions had dazzled his eyes and half blinded him, and he had left the proper pathway. He thought he could have found it blindfold, and that he knew every step of the way. But his senses had left him suddenly some-

how, he supposed, and but that he had been seen and hailed by the labourers in the highway, there could be little question as to what would have been the poor old man's fate.

In some measure recovered, the shepherd persisted in one special statement. He was confident that he had heard cries for help proceeding from a spot close adjoining the Druid's Block. It was a man's voice, he said: a stranger's voice, not marked by the Hengeborough method of talking. He should have known it if it had been a Hengeborough man's voice. He was well acquainted with the Hengeborough people. He could not make a mistake about their voices. Some stranger had lost his way upon the down, and was most likely buried in the snow-drift just under the Druid's Block.

After some time, moved by the old man's persistence, an exploring party, armed with shovels and pickaxes, and provided with lanterns, lest night should overtake them, set forth for the Druid's Block. The Reverend James Carmichael, the chief promoter of the undertaking, eagerly bent upon the task, headed the party.

They made their way with difficulty over the snow-shrouded down. They found an overturned dog-cart, and deeply embedded in the snow a horse and a man. Both were stiffly frozen, and quite dead. It was with difficulty the bodies could be dug out, they were so incrustated with ice. The man was easily recognised. He was handsomely dressed, and wrapped with furs. In the pocket of his coat was found a jeweller's case containing a very costly bracelet. The curate knew him at once to be Captain Thirlwall.

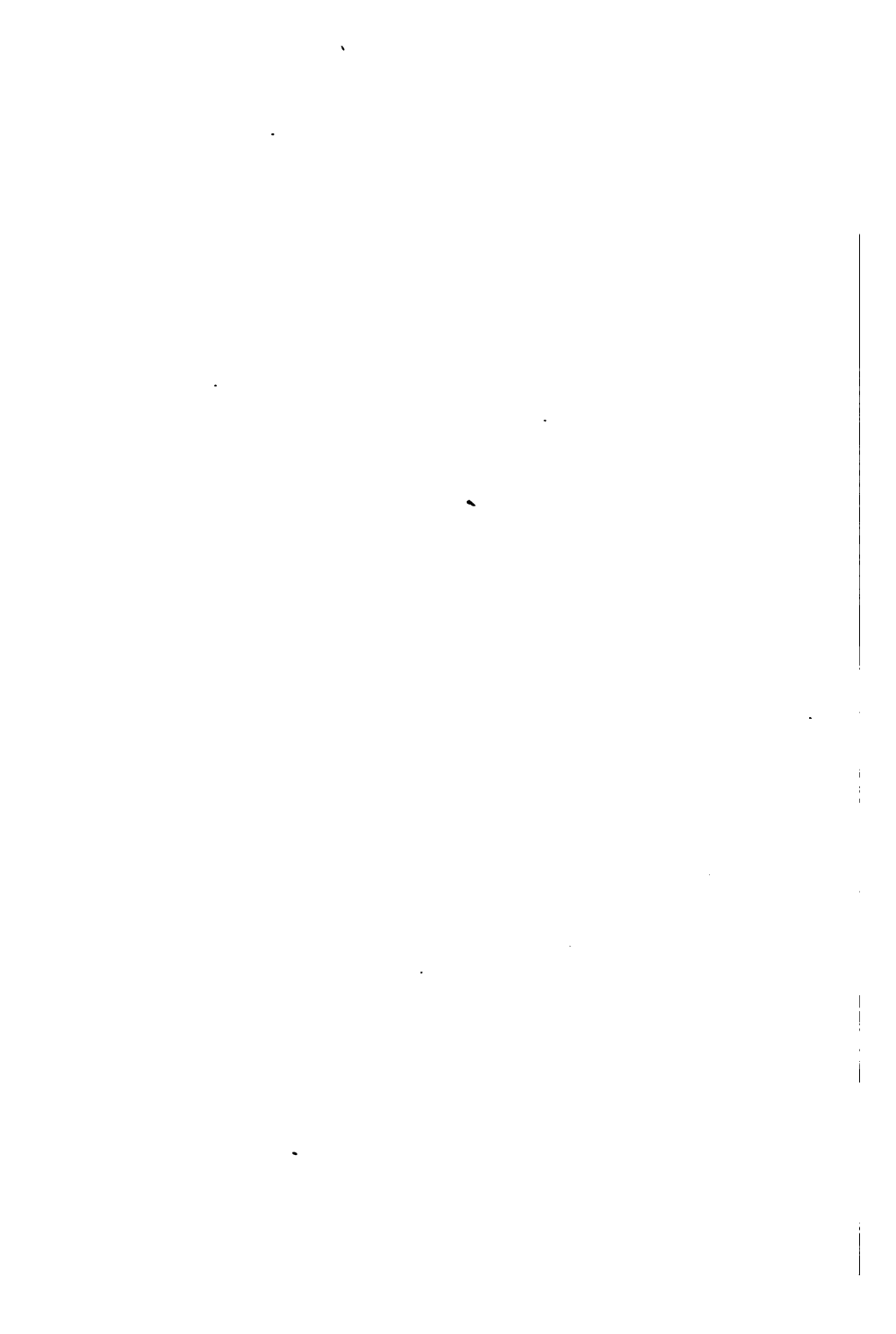
"Whatever brought the man here at such a time!" asked the curate. But who could answer? "Gently, my men. Take out the cushions from the cart, and lift him on your shoulders. Poor gentleman! Heaven have mercy on his soul."

The body was borne to the "White Greyhound." But for a long while Mrs. Dottrell knew nothing of what had happened.

She was confined to her room with fever. The doctor had forbidden that anything should be told her likely to excite or distress her. Before she knew of her lover's fate, she had made full confes-

sion of her sin to her husband; obtaining—need it be said?—his full forgiveness. Penitent and changed, she learned in time to merit that love which had been hers so absolutely long before she deserved it.

A CONFIRMED BACHELOR.



A CONFIRMED BACHELOR.

CHAPTER I.

MY GREAT UNCLE.

MANY years since, when it was the fashion to drink Madeira—I rather think the physicians of His Most Gracious Majesty King George IV. had insisted greatly upon its precious tonic properties—and when, moreover, there was Madeira to drink, Messrs. Strangways and Simkinson, of Mole's Buildings, Tower Street, were wine-merchants of assured reputation. The firm had been long established; its cellars were extensive, its stock of wines very choice and valuable, and in the trade it was generally recognised as “a Madeira house” of the first class. True, its charges were

of the highest; but those were bibulous times, when men did not hesitate to disburse lavishly for their drinks—extravagance had fewer outlets and opportunities than at present—and Strangways and Simkinson would have shrunk from supplying a cheap or an inferior liquor as from the commission of a crime. As yet, “dinner sherry” was undiscovered, and grocers did not then deal in what they are now pleased to term wine. The man who set upon his table a bottle of Strangway’s Madeira—heedfully decanted, and as tenderly preserved from draughts and chills as though it had been a newly-born infant—felt as one who had accomplished a meritorious, and indeed magnanimous action.

Mr. Joseph Strangways, the head of the firm, was my great-uncle, a gentleman of somewhat advanced age when I first formed his acquaintance. He was of low stature, and of portly figure, with an enduring flush, as from perennial good cheer, suffusing his complexion. He favoured a method of costume that had perhaps been fashionable in the period of his adolescence; to me it certainly

seemed out of date. He usually wore drab gaiters and a mulberry-coloured coat adorned with bright basket-buttons ; a striped kerseymere waistcoat ; a crumpled white neckcloth, carelessly tied, and with streaming ends ; and a protuberant shirt-frill in the form of a lady's fan, secured in its position by means of a small diamond-circled brooch. His head was crowned with a sort of ginger-bread-hued wig, combed and crested well on to his forehead, so as nearly to conceal his eyebrows. These artificial locks of his did not match very well — probably, he did not intend for a moment that they should—with the little crescents of white whiskers he cherished on the summits of his cheeks. He was a prodigious snuff-taker, and carried silk pocket-handkerchiefs of unusual size and exceeding brilliance of colour. If there was something of senility in his aspect, there was little in his habits and manners. He was vigorous, stirring, and alert, with a firm, sharp voice, and a clear, shrewd, grey eye. He was a thorough man of business, inclined to energetic action, and to vehement opinions and forms of speech. He indulged fully,

I may mention, in the old-world and most reprehensible habit of swearing. I remember that the female members of our family were wont to listen with a sort of horrified shrinking to the violent terms he was prone to intermingle with his conversation.

Mr. Strangways was a bachelor, and it was said of him that he "objected to children." I know that he was rather the dread of our nursery. Uncommon care was devoted to my toilet when it was thought possible that I, as an infant, might come under the inspection of Uncle Strangways. Soap and water were quite lavished upon me; I was towelled until I glowed and smarted all over; and the hair-brush and comb were applied to me with an unremitting and indiscriminate zeal most painful to my ears, neck, forehead, and scalp. I was besought to be especially watchful over my bearing and discourse in the presence of my great-uncle. I believe now, that although he entertained rather Spartan views as to the rearing and disciplining of the young, he was not really harshly disposed towards them. But he had a difficulty

in establishing relations with us. He approached us too abruptly, and addressed us with a force unsuited to our infantile systems. What he probably meant for jocoseness was to us alarming severity. He thought it facetious to roar and gesticulate at us until he nearly frightened us into convulsions; and he by no means commended himself to our good opinion by gravely counselling that we should all be soundly birched every morning as punctually as we were washed, and otherwise insisting that we should be trained for the business of life after a very rigorous system indeed. Of myself, he was kind enough to pronounce that I had a good disposition, but that I had been badly brought up; however, when I went to school he "tipped" me liberally.

Mole's Buildings consisted of a small paved court hemmed in by tall gloomy houses. The inclosure was reached by turning suddenly out of Tower Street, pushing back a rusty iron gate, and traversing a low and narrow passage. In the centre of the Buildings stood one forlorn

lamp-post, like a stray sheep in a pound, or a haggard prisoner undergoing a long term of solitary confinement. It was some relief, perhaps, to escape from the uproar of the streets into the comparative silence of the diminutive quadrangle; otherwise, the Buildings could boast few attractions. They knew little of fresh air; they never saw the sun; and when once a fog was fairly inclosed within their four walls, it found its way out again with extreme difficulty. The atmosphere of the precinct, therefore, was usually of a very dense quality—humid, soot-laden, and oppressive. The pavement generally gleamed with moisture, wearing, in the driest weather, a rich coating of green mould; the brickwork streamed with a sort of inky perspiration; the narrow windows were darkly clouded with dank dust; while “blacks” fell in ceaseless showers, as though by an unwearying hand shaken from aloft out of some colossal and inexhaustible pepper-caster.

Still, the Buildings had undoubted claims to respectability. They were of ancient date. They had come into being long before the “speculative

builder" was ever thought of, or the modern system prevailed of "running up" houses, and supplying the world, by wholesale and retail, with ready-made ruins; and they were of thoroughly substantial construction. Time and grime had soiled and obscured their red-brick faces, and sadly choked the carvings and decorations of their pediments and portals. Yet these evidences of former tastefulness and painstaking were not wholly effaced. Within, the houses were really rich in oak wainscoting, in twisted balusters, moulded ceilings, and elaborate cornices. It is true, the very deficient supply of light did not permit of these embellishments being carefully observed or fairly appreciated. Still, there they were. The Buildings, indeed, pertained of right to a period when citizens of "credit and renown" inhabited their city; when it was to them not merely a place of business, but an abiding-place as well. The rich merchant was then content to regard his ground-floor as his counting-house, and to carry on his career as a private person in the upper chambers of the same edifice.

In one corner of the Buildings stood the house of my Uncle Strangways and his partner Simkinson. It could be also approached from the rear, which looked into a narrow tortuous street, composed of numberless warehouses and offices, and called Wharfage Lane. This way, followed across Thames Street, led down a rather steep incline to the river side. For business purposes, my uncle's premises were ordinarily entered from Wharfage Lane, so that the door in the Buildings could boast of a private and unofficial character. The cellars of the firm were understood to extend far beneath the adjoining streets, even to the foundations of the parish church of St. Mungo, Down-at-hill—a name which had, not inappropriately, been corrupted into St. Mungo-down-at-heel—for the establishment, although it possessed a rector, a curate, a clerk, a clock, and a chime of bells, yet lacked the garniture of a congregation. My uncle's tenement was pervaded by a curious combination of odours. Gas, as a worthless novelty, was contemned by the firm; but a scent of swaling tallow-candles united with the fragrance of full and empty

wine casks, of saturated bungs, of vinously soaked sawdust, with the fumes engendered by the process of bottling, by the burning of sealing-wax, by fungous and prodigious growths of cobwebs, mould, and mildew, and all the indescribable smells arising from warm, unventilated cellars, and generally the carrying on of a vintner's trade.

Simkinson, the junior partner, was also considerably younger in years than my uncle; nevertheless, Simkinson's aspect was certainly elderly. His hair was very grey, though it grew thickly, standing erect, like a thriving plantation of brushwood. He was of corpulent contour, and the deliberation that usually comes of maturity and increase of personal bulk attended his movements. He had a large, fleshy, strongly-marked face, yet of thoroughly good-humoured expression. He did not adopt my uncle's bygone style of attire, but at the same time avoided all charge of juvenility in relation to the cut and colour of his clothing. He was generally to be seen in a black frock-coat, full and long in the skirts, and tightly buttoned across his ample front. A cross-barred cravat enwrapped

his neck, while liberal collars of lustrous whiteness screened his cheeks and titillated the lobes of his ears. He wrote an exquisite hand, and kept the books of the house with wondrous neatness and precision. He was a man of pleasant manners, and generally esteemed for his sensible and business-like ways. My uncle, however, regarded him as still quite a youth, and not a youth of much capacity or perception either. Still, they were excellent friends; and Simkinson being also a bachelor, they resided together comfortably and amicably enough in the upper rooms of their house in Mole's Buildings. Their domestic arrangements were supervised by one Mrs. Brocklebank, a portly and comely widow lady of indisputable respectability, thoroughly skilled and experienced in the duties she was required to discharge.

By all who knew them, these partners and friends had been long regarded as "confirmed bachelors." They appeared to enjoy, and had been heard to vaunt, their celibate condition; they jeered and made mouths at matrimony. In their eyes, all husbands were henpecked, and all wives

were scolds. Men were as flies; women, spiders; and marriage the fatal and entangling web. To be safe was to be single. The wedding-ring was the real bond of slavery. No doubt, it was a shameful creed; but it seemed sufficient unto them; they had grown or were growing old in it; and the chance of their ever being converted to a wiser and better faith was deemed to be remote indeed.

My uncle was the more devout and absolute upholder of these opinions. But his zeal and stanchness sufficiently infected Simkinson, who was in this and in other respects rather towed along, as it were, by his partner: yet with all canvas spread the while, and not too heavily ballasted, so that the strain upon the tug was of a reduced kind. The connecting-rope was often slackened, indeed, to the extent of immersion, so that it almost seemed as though Simkinson were proceeding of his own accord upon a course of his own choosing. But really Simkinson was but the seconder of my uncle's motions, and content to say "ditto" to his enunciations.

The economy of their lives was of a homely, simple, old-fashioned sort. They rarely strayed any distance from their establishment in Mole's Buildings. They passed their days in their offices and wine-cellars. At that date, the hours of business extended some way into the night, and early closing was a thing unknown. As was the habit of the rest of their class, the partners dined at mid-day; a substantial repast was prepared for them by their housekeeper—who also attended to the alimentary needs of their apprentices, clerks, and servants. The cares and duties of the day at an end, they had some time on their hands before retiring to their pillows. Habitually, they resorted to the "Salutation" Tavern, in their immediate neighbourhood; a long-established hostelry, which has since made way for a new thoroughfare, or been turned into offices, or into a smart modern public-house; at anyrate, it may be said to exist no more. But in its time it was of good repute for its comfort—though this was of a confined and unventilated sort—and for the superiority of its liquors and cheer, generally. It was low-ceilinged, its floors

had sand for carpeting ; its straight-backed chairs and benches knew no such luxuries as cushioned seats. And there was the smell as of a cupboard about it, but still a cupboard that contained wholesome articles. The fumes of tobacco and of by-gone meals lingered, perhaps, unduly in the atmosphere ; but, as antidote to these, was the fragrance of lemons, of nutmegs and other spices, and of hot spirituous drinks—the compounding of which was a special gift of the “*Salutation*” bar-parlour. But, altogether, and notably on wintry nights, when a red fire roared and glowed in its ample grate, painting with flame-colour the polished surfaces of the surrounding panelling and furniture, there were many less pleasurable places than this old-world tavern. Here the partners drank their punch of nights—their wine was for their customers, they held ; they might be good judges of it, but they were not so wasteful as to consume it themselves to any great extent—met their friends and gossips of the vicinity, interchanged pinches of snuff and genial converse, read the journals, discussed the topics of the day and the quotations of the markets,

sustained themselves with substantial suppers, fiercely hot, from the "Salutation" kitchen, freely expressed their opinions on men and things; and generally passed evenings of a not irrational, or, indeed, unattractive kind.

CHAPTER II.

THE JUNIOR PARTNER.

I HAVE hinted that Mr. Strangways did not esteem his partner in any exaggerated degree. He recognised his junior's worth in relation to his book-keeping, letter-writing, and other official occupations, while still maintaining that he needed much supervision and direction. Himself the head of the firm, my uncle would not view Simkinson even as its shoulders, but rather as some very subordinate portion of its structure—the calves of its legs, let us say. On the whole, I think, he was not unprepared for weakness of conduct even to folly on the part of Simkinson. And this was quite as well; for the junior partner was destined to try severely the temper and forbearance of Mr. Strang-

ways, to say nothing of stultifying himself, eating his own words to a surfeiting extent, and, with a violence and suddenness that looked like desperation, flying straight in the face of opinions he had long and profusely professed.

There had been from the first this infirmity in the nature of Simkinson: he played the flute. A fondness for music had perhaps long lurked unsuspected in his system; but presently it manifested itself in the most open manner. He took to carrying constantly in his pocket the bones, as it were, of his instrument, and, upon light provocation, he would join these together, and breathe musical life into the completed fabric. It need hardly be said that my uncle contemplated the harmonious inclinations of his partner with scorn and detestation, and did not hesitate to express, in his most forcible manner, his sentiments upon the subject. Simkinson so far deferred to the prejudices of the head of the firm, that he rarely performed within earshot of my uncle. Sometimes feeble sounds, as from a flute in the agonies of suffocation, were audible in remote corners of the wine-cellars, or among the

chimney-stacks of the Buildings; but, as a rule, Simkinson carried on his studies and indulged his tastes in other neighbourhoods. My uncle could scarcely refrain from fierce malediction, if he but heard the fragments of the flute rattle together accidentally in Simkinson's coat-tails!

But as a flute-player must fulfil his mission, and evoke sounds of a more or less melodious character, Simkinson was now often found detached from my uncle's side, and absent from the nightly meetings at the "Salutation" Tavern. He sought society in which his gifts might meet better appreciation. He was a visitor at the house of a Mr. Spreadbury, a solicitor resident in Crosby Square, Bishopsgate. The Spreadburies were musical amateurs. Old Mr. Spreadbury himself was reputed to be an able performer upon the violoncello; his daughters were accomplished pianists; one of his sons was accustomed to produce voluminous and portentous noises from a French-horn. When Simkinson was invited to Crosby Square, a request was always added that he would "bring his flute." Of course he did so, gladly enough. "They'd pay you any money to

leave it behind you, if they were of my mind," growled my uncle. "But there—that old Spreadbury always *was* a fool! and there's no accounting for tastes. People will be inviting donkeys into their parlours next, on purpose to hear them bray!" To this affronting observation, Simkinson did not reply. He preferred to maintain a prudent if sorrowful silence; and it was noticeable that by this time he had ceased to join in or to approve my uncle's diatribes against matrimony.

The result many professed to have foreseen. Before long, Simkinson was engaged to be married to the youngest Miss Spreadbury! My uncle was by no means the first to be informed of this arrangement. There was even some pusillanimous delay in addressing him on the subject; but, of course, he had to be told at last. Simkinson could not please himself as to the form of words he should adopt on the occasion. He watched his opportunity for many days, and is understood to have greatly stimulated himself with glasses of the best Madeira—from the sample bottles in the counting-house—ere he could be brought to mention the matter to

the head of the firm. Contrary to general expectation, however, my uncle received the news with considerable self-command. "More fool you," he said; and Simkinson prepared for an explosion of anger, scorn, and indignation. But Mr. Strangways was upon the whole, if rather grim, still sufficiently calm. "The youngest? of course. The one with the turned-up nose, and her shoulders out of her dress? Well—I won't tell you, you'll live to repent it; nor I won't wish you joy; because no good ever comes of saying things of that kind. You're old enough to know your own mind, if not to know better. I'm not surprised. A man who plays a flute is equal to any kind of tomfoolery. Only mind: you don't bring her here. None of that, Simkinson."

The junior partner hastened to explain that he had never dreamed of such a proceeding.

"Because," Mr. Strangways continued, "so soon as ever she comes in at one door, I go out at the other—understand that. And don't expect me to go to your wedding—or to any christening—if your wife should afflict you with children—or to

any other ridiculous celebration of that kind. There ; I won't say any more, because I don't want to hurt your feelings, and the least said the soonest mended ; only, if you ask my opinion, you'd better by a deal have got locked up in Bedlam or in Newgate, than have made such a confounded idiot of yourself. I've no other observation to make, Simkinson."

Simkinson was very thankful to have the interview terminated, even in this abrupt way. He had been prepared for far more acrimonious speech and demeanour on the part of my uncle. He even related to his friends that, in regard to his marriage, he had been treated with marked kindness by the head of the firm.

Such forbearance as my uncle had shown, I think may be attributed to a sense of satisfaction that his opinion of Simkinson had been thoroughly justified. The result had demonstrated the soundness of his views. Every one knew, old Spreadbury wasn't a man to take capital out of his business to give it to his children. Without a doubt, the

Spreadburies had from the first determined upon securing Simkinson. That was about what their musical evenings amounted to. Practising! Nicely poor Simkinson had been practised upon!

There was much joking at the "Salutation," of course, and punch-drinking too, at the expense of Simkinson. He bore it all with exemplary good-humour. On one occasion, however, when the fun was urged a little too far, my uncle, to the surprise of all, intervened on his partner's behalf. "A joke was a joke," he said, "and he wasn't one to hinder merriment, as they all knew. But enough had been said. There was no need to press unduly upon their friend. He wasn't the only man who'd made a fool of himself, and, at anyrate, it wasn't for them, of all people, to be severe on his failings. Suppose they all joined in drinking his good health once more, and then dismissed the subject—for somewhere at any rate."

Simkinson was deeply grateful to the head of the firm.

Altogether, my uncle was held to have behaved

handsomely enough. On the eve of the wedding, he presented his partner with a huge silver teapot. It was of inelegant design, but its massiveness and value were not to be disputed.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. SIMKINSON.

SIMKINSON was now only seen in Mole's Buildings during business hours. He took a house in Doughty Street, and furnished it for his young wife in a thoroughly comfortable and substantial style. Mrs. Simkinson avoided the City, and never ventured to set foot upon the premises of the firm. She did not even express any curiosity as to the place of business of her husband and his partner. It was understood that she was completely imbued with Simkinson's deep respect for Strangways and his prejudices.

So that, except for the absence of the junior partner at night, things went on much in their old way in Mole's Buildings. Of course the "Saluta-

tion" had a guest the less to make ready for and welcome to its comforts. As a husband, Simkinson had now home cares and duties to attend to. Besides, he had come rather to dread the "Salutation;" he was conscious that its staple converse and familiar jokes were no longer for his ears, especially as there was every probability of his being constituted its leading butt and topic. And then his tea and slippers were awaiting him in Doughty Street: not to mention the cordial greetings and caresses of his youthful spouse on his return from the business of the day.

But altogether Simkinson's absence was much felt by his City friends and gossips. My uncle said little; but there can be no doubt that the head of the firm greatly missed his junior. He had not valued him, and he did not now profess to set any great store upon him; still, he began to perceive that Simkinson's companionship had been of more service and support to him than he could well afford to dispense with. His remarks lost something of their effect from the dumbness of that familiar echo and assent which Simkinson had been

went so faithfully to supply. Mr. Strangways was as a man who had lost a considerable portion of his shadow. He found it rather depressing coming away alone of nights from the tavern to his solitary life in the Buildings. Perhaps, too, he was oppressed by an uneasy suspicion that, after all, Simkinson had not done such a very foolish thing.

Still, my uncle had been so far true to himself and to his word. He was not present at the wedding; he had not visited the bride; he had abstained from paying any of the compliments, or from regarding any of the forms and etiquettes usual under the circumstances. He had given his teapot; and there, as he determined, was an end of the matter. He would go no farther. Certainly he would keep aloof from Doughty Street, and from all participation in the joys or miseries—as the case might be—of Simkinson's married life. So he was understood to have expressed himself.

It should be stated, however, that my uncle had not been invited to Doughty Street. Oftentimes Simkinson had considered the subject—had be-

stowed upon it, indeed, much and painful reflection. Most heartily would he have welcomed to his house the head of the firm—would have felt deeply grateful for a visit from him. But he feared to give offence; he shrunk from the rebuff that seemed to him the inevitable result of any bold proffer of hospitality on his part. At the same time he accused himself of cowardice, and of some show of disregard for his partner in this respect. He was a kind man and a generous. The happiness he now enjoyed—and there could be no doubt that he was supremely happy—he would gladly have shared, so far as he might, with his old comrade. He longed to admit him to the joys of Doughty Street. He looked forward anxiously—as to an event so felicitous that it was almost presumption to hope for its ever really occurring—to some day seeing old Joseph Strangways' legs under the Simkinson mahogany. Perhaps—for man is not perfect—there was just a grain of the mildest malice in this solicitude. It might be that he desired to make manifest his happiness, and the refutation it afforded of Strangways' sinister

opinions concerning a married life. Simkinson was content to forget the support he had once given to those acrid sentiments.

He took heart at last.

"Strangways," he said one morning, coughing timidly as he spoke, and with an embarrassed expression upon his face, "it is my birthday on Wednesday. We always used to have a little celebration of it. Don't let us give up the old custom. Come and dine with us in Doughty Street."

"What does your wife say?" my uncle inquired rather grimly.

"She joins me in asking you. She'll be delighted to see you."

My uncle took a huge pinch of snuff with extreme deliberation, eyeing his partner the while severely.

"Getting tired of her society, and want to fall back upon mine, eh?"

Simkinson waived reply to this question.

"It will give us both very great pleasure if you will honour us with your company."

"This is the first time you've invited me, Simkinson," said my uncle, "and you've been married now some months."

Simkinson looked perplexed. "Well, frankly, Strangways, I didn't think you'd have come if I *had* asked you."

"Perhaps I shouldn't. But you might have tried it on. It would have been a compliment—not a very costly one."

Simkinson was silent. He blamed himself that he had not paid this compliment. At the same time he felt persuaded that if he had, my uncle, in all probability, would have resented it, and regarded it unpleasantly.

"There'll only be ourselves," he said, after a pause.

"Ashamed to introduce me to your West-end friends?" My uncle considered the neighbourhood of Doughty Street as pretentiously fashionable and aristocratic.

"Don't say such things as that, Strangways; please, don't," said the junior partner in a hurt tone.

"What will you give me for dinner?"

"Anything you like."

"No soup or fish nonsense, then. A plain boiled leg of mutton and turnips?"

"Certainly."

"And a roly-poly pudding?"

"By all means."

"And a glass of hot grog afterwards?"

"Most decidedly."

"I think I'll come, then," said my uncle, after some moments of grave reflection. He felt, perhaps, that he was sacrificing his character for consistency. He could not do this without effort. Presently he added: "You really mean it? You were not counting upon my refusal?"

"Of course not, Strangways."

"Well, if you were, I'll disappoint you; for I'll come."

"And we'll have a pleasant evening. At any-rate we'll do all we can to make you comfortable."

"Mind," resumed my uncle, "I'll have no greengrocer in Berlin gloves hanging on to the back of my chair, and breathing hard into the

nape of my neck. No genteel tomfoolery of that kind, Simkinson."

"Of course not. We've a neat, handy parlour-maid, who does all that's necessary in the way of waiting."

"I hope her cap-ribbons ain't too streaming, or made up into too many bows?"

"I think she's moderate as to cap-ribbons."

"Is she pretty?"

"Well, really. Yes. Perhaps she might be called pretty."

"Then, mark my words, Simkinson: your wife will soon give her warning. And you mind what you're about with that parlour-maid, or you'll catch it. It's plain to me that you're no better than a Lothario, for all your gray hair."

This was spoken fiercely, and fortified by an oath; but it was meant jocosely. Simkinson so understood it, and in high good-humour laughed heartily. My uncle's eyes twinkled curiously, and he chuckled audibly as he retreated to his private room. There he took snuff prodigiously, waving about his brilliant-hued handkerchief, as though it

had been a flag of victory. He had no triumph to boast of in the matter, however, save over himself.

Having thus accepted his partner's invitation, my uncle determined that, so far as he could, he would do credit to himself and to the occasion. He attired himself in the dress suit, with a black velvet waistcoat, and the protuberant shirtfrill, he was accustomed to wear when, as sometimes happened, he dined with the Lord Mayor, or joined the festivities of the City Company—the Vintners'—of which he was a member; and a certain inherent, but long-forgotten spirit of gallantry stirred again within him, and found expression. On his way to Doughty Street he purchased a bouquet of large dimensions and choice composition, and presented it, with many old-fashioned bows and genuflexions, to the young wife of his old friend.

Still, these concessions notwithstanding, my uncle had determined that he would not be won over too easily to countenancing the proceedings of the Simkinsons, or refrain from the assertion of his own independence. He would be polite, but he would still be himself. So he rapped out a round

oath or two in the course of dinner. Mrs. Simkinson blinked a little at first—as though a flash of lightning had crossed her path—but speedily recovered her self-possession. No doubt she had been duly tutored by her husband as to the peculiarities of his partner's vocabulary.

The repast was successful. Some slight failure had attended the mashing of the turnips, which greatly afflicted Mrs. Simkinson; but the mutton was all that could be wished. Mr. Strangways freely confessed that he had never eaten better, and made altogether an excellent dinner. The roly-poly pudding was quite to his taste; and by the time he had enjoyed a glass of port wine as an harmonious accompaniment to his cheese, he was a thoroughly satisfied man, and had put from him all inclination to criticise or find fault.

Indeed, the Simkinsons conducted themselves most irreproachably. Their manner was completely cordial, simple, and natural. They did not flaunt ostentatiously before their guest their connubial happiness; neither did they oppress him with too urgent and laborious a hospitality. The husband

was cheerful and good-humoured without boisterousness. The wife, a little timid at first, ably and gracefully seconded her spouse's efforts. She was soberly dressed in a dark-coloured silk dress, which permitted no exceptional revelation of her shoulders. Her nose was not more upturned than nature had ordained. She owned a clear complexion, a pretty smile, a soft voice, and tender grey eyes, and she certainly looked very young beside her mate. But then, as though to bridge over this discrepancy, she wore a neat matronly cap, not of too antique or severe a form, nor yet of too obviously coquettish a description, but a becoming head-dress, such as a young married woman might assume without incurring accusation of any kind. The parlour-maid, it may be added, acquitted herself deftly, and her cap-ribbons did not invite adverse remark.

Mr. Strangways was punctually supplied with the hot grog for which he had stipulated, and was afterwards solaced with a cup of tea from "his own tea-pot," as Mrs. Simkinson described the vessel he had presented upon her marriage. Could he

help being gratified at the unaffected pride she took in her massive silver teapot? Simkinson did not produce his flute, but a measure of music nevertheless distinguished the entertainment; for the young wife, urged by her guest, sang with excellent taste and expression the old-world ditty of "Wapping Old Stairs."

Mr. Strangways expressed himself as much pleased by this performance, and, indeed, appeared affected almost to tears by its simple grace and pathos. It had possibly been a favourite song of his in times long past, and tender memories and associations had gathered round it. He beat time to the tune, and altogether developed a tolerance, to say the least of it, for music, that much amazed his partner, who had lively recollections of the offence given by his own efforts in that direction.

He left early in a cab, parting upon very cordial terms indeed with his entertainers. He even kissed Mrs. Simkinson, but in a staid and ceremonious manner. "My dear, I'm old enough to be your

grandfather," he said as he gently pressed his old lips upon her soft, round, blushing cheek. He did not by this remark design to convey any reference to Simkinson's years, which, however advanced, fell considerably short of his own sum.

"I'll come again, if you'll ask me," said my uncle graciously in reply to some kindly expressions on the part of the Simkinsons, and he went away in great good-humour. But he was terribly stern and abrupt with the cabman who drove him back to Mole's Buildings.

It was natural, perhaps, that Mrs. Simkinson should sigh a sigh of relief at his departure—it had been a trying evening to her.

"I hope you think all went off well, James?" she said to her husband.

"Capitally."

"I was dreadfully frightened at first, but I got better afterwards. It was foolish of me; for, after all, there wasn't so very much to be afraid of. I shall know better another time. And really, altogether, do you know, I think I like Mr. Strang-

to that he had once enjoyed. Hitherto, the jesting at the "Salutation" had been abundant enough, but it had rarely been provided at my uncle's expense. There had been a sufficiency of laughter, but it had not been pointed much in his direction.

One Royster, of the corn-market, a great frequenter of the tavern, noted as a choice spirit, and something of a wag, whose waggishness, however, was of rather a rude type, now often ventured to banter my uncle. Of old, Simkinson had been an established target for Royster's jokes, but as these were not very pointed, and Simkinson offered a large but robust surface of resistance, no severe measure of execution resulted from the marksman's labours.

"We shall have you getting a wife next, Strangways," Royster said one evening; "and imitating old Simmy." By "old Simmy," he of course meant, in his uncouth way, reference to Mr. Simkinson. "I've heard say that matrimony runs through a house like measles. There's no getting inoculated against it. One's taken after another, before you've time to turn round. Age

won't save you. The old 'uns catch it for all the world like the young 'uns; quicker and worse, if anything. I've known older men than you tied up." And then followed a jocose comparison, in the very worst taste, and void of all originality, between the marriage tie and the noose of the last officer of justice.

The room was still during this speech. An expectation prevailed that my uncle would deliver himself after a very strenuous fashion, indeed, and that, as was whispered in corners, "Royster would get rather better than he brought." A muttered caution was passed about to the purport that "he'd do well to take care how he put old Joe Strangways' monkey up." But, greatly to the surprise of all, my uncle held his peace. He simply blinked at the fire, and took to stirring his tumbler busily.

"Marriage is easy enough. Like a prison, for that matter. You're soon in, if you ain't so soon out. A man's only to ask and to have. There's women enough in the world. There's wedding-rings in all the jewellers' windows. There's a parson

in every church. Sharp's the word if you mean business. I wonder you ain't got married before, Strangways. You're just the sort of man as women would come round, I should have thought. How you've gone on single all these years, is more than I can say. Not that it's too late now; you've time before you, and the church don't count age an obstacle. The old corn sometimes fetches a better price than the new. Bless you, you'd soon find a market, if you sought one. There's many a woman would bid for you, and bid high too. Now, there's that Mrs. Brocklebank of yours."

There arose a general murmur that this was "too bad, much too bad." It was felt to be a great liberty. If gentlemen's housekeepers were to be dragged into the conversation, and their names bandied about in this lax way, where were things to end? The sanctities of private life were invaded, and decency was defied. Society could not exist upon such terms. Still, my uncle said nothing. The irrepressible and audacious Royster persisted with his discourse.

"Mrs. Brocklebank's a fine woman," he said,

addressing himself pointedly to Mr. Strangeways.

"You really think she's a fine woman?" my uncle inquired mildly.

"Certainly, I do; no question of it. Weigh her; measure her; walk round her. She'll pull down a many bushels of corn, if they was put in the scale against her, would Mrs. Brocklebank. How you've managed to let her remain Mrs. Brocklebank so long, I can't think; nor how she's let you remain a bachelor so long, neither."

There were cries of "Shame!" "Scandalous!" "The man's drunk!" My uncle was quietly gazing at the clock.

"I mean no scandal," went on the outrageous Royster. "Strangeways knows his own business, I suppose. There's no harm in saying Mrs. Brocklebank's a fine woman. I dare any man to deny it."

"Nay, but coupling names in that way, Royster," said one of the guests, staring into the depths of his grog, and shaking his head deprecatingly; "it's against all rules. It's unfair—there!

I'll go farther. It's offensive—right down offensive. It's wounding to gentlemen's feelings. I don't care who says it isn't."

My uncle drew his huge gold watch from his fob, and compared it with the "Salutation" clock.

"I mean no offence," resumed Royster, a little abashed, for he perceived that the feeling of the room was decidedly against him. "I don't want to hurt any gentleman's feelings. But I'm not one to be put down. What I said, I'll say again." He emptied his tumbler, and glared aggressively at the guest who had interposed. "Parties shouldn't be in too great a hurry to be offended. For coupling names, that's not my doing. If names come together, who can hinder it? I'm not called on to part 'em, am I? What *did* I say! Simkinson's married; why not Strangways? If married, why not to Mrs. Brocklebank? A man might do worse. She's admitted on all hands to be a fine woman."

"Well, well; enough said," the guest observed; he was a sugar-broker of pacific nature and great respectability. "It's no affair of yours, you know, Royster."

"Did I say it *was* my affair? I appeal to the room. It's Strangways' affair; I know that very well. If he likes to marry Mrs. Brocklebank, why shouldn't he? Let him, I say. Perhaps he's married to her already, for all I know. Such things have happened before now."

This was beyond all bounds. There was a great commotion in the room. All agreed that Royster was quite insufferable. "What's come to the man?" people asked. "He *can* be pleasant. He never was one to go on like this before."

In the midst of the tumult, my uncle rose. There was apprehension, perhaps even hope, that he was then and there about to fall upon Royster, and chastise him severely for his insolence, or at least that he meditated a stinging speech, denunciatory of the treatment to which he had been subjected. Mr. Strangways, however, merely took down his hat from the peg appropriated to his use, said in his usual precise way: "Good night, gentlemen all," and departed. It was noted that he had left the "Salutation" about half an hour earlier than usual. Still he appeared in nowise

disturbed at what had happened. Altogether, his conduct occasioned much amazement to his friends. He was hardly in their eyes the same "old Joe Strangways" they had known since so many years.

"Give me my candle," said my uncle, when the door in Mole's Buildings was opened to admit him by Mrs. Brocklebank, the housekeeper. She lighted his candle for him. He stood for a few moments at the foot of the stairs, tapping his fingers on his chin, with a meditative yet irresolute air.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Strangways?" inquired Mrs. Brocklebank.

He started, turned towards her, and held up the candle so that its light might fall full upon her face. For some moments he remained so, speechless.

"You're looking uncommonly well, to-night, Mrs. Brocklebank," he said at length.

"Lor, Mr. Strangways, I'm pretty middling, thank you," answered the housekeeper.

"Uncommonly well," my uncle repeated gravely.

"I'm flushed, that's all," said Mrs. Brocklebank. "I've been bending over my work, or the kitchen fire's caught my cheeks. I'm usually pale, I think."

"No, not pale, I shouldn't say pale, Mrs. Brocklebank," remarked my uncle thoughtfully, as he continued to gaze at his housekeeper.

"Well, sir, colour don't matter much at my years."

Mr. Strangways seemed to muse over this statement with an inclination to dispute it.

"Would you like the warming-pan to-night, sir?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Brocklebank; not to-night, I think."

He mounted a few steps, and then paused anew. "Good-night, sir," said the housekeeper. He took no heed of this benediction.

"Was Brocklebank a good husband to you?" he inquired suddenly.

"Well, sir, he might have been better, and that's the truth. But he's been dead this many a year now, and I don't care to speak ill of him."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Drowned at sea, I think you told me once?"

"First-mate on board a coasting-vessel, wrecked upon the Good'ins. His poor body was picked up at low-tide with all his features full of sand."

"Did he beat you?"

"Never, when he was sober, sir."

"Was he often sober?"

"Not always, sir."

"Poor creature!" It was not clear whether my uncle referred to his housekeeper or to her deceased husband. "Good-night, Mrs. Brocklebank;" and he continued his route upstairs.

"Royster was right," he muttered. "He's a blackguard"—here Mr. Strangways swore—"but he's right. She is a fine woman; there's no gain-saying it. And people have been coupling names, have they? It's a liberty, but perhaps it's not so very surprising. 'Simkinson married; why not Strangways?' That's how they talk. 'If married, why not to Mrs. Brocklebank?' 'A man might do worse.' A fine woman—certainly. I wonder I've

never noticed it before. Yes, that coarse blockhead Royster's right—no question of it."

"What's come to him?" Mrs. Brocklebank asked herself. "He never remarked on my looks before, and he seemed quite particular about 'em to-night." She studied her reflection in the looking-glass. "I'm much as usual, I think, only my cap might have been put on straighter. It was quite strange how he looked at me. Had he been taking an extra glass? Gentlemen will, at times, and then there's no knowing what they won't say or do. But no—he's home half an hour earlier than usual, and sober and steady as a judge he was; there's no saying otherwise. But for all that, he did look at me uncommon strange. His eyes quite pierced me. And why should he ask about Brocklebank? Very odd of him, certainly."

CHAPTER V.

"SOMETHING ON HIS MIND."

I SHOULD state of this narrative, that while I hold it to deal most veraciously with certain passages in the later life of my great-uncle, Mr. Joseph Strangways, it yet of necessity does not consist wholly of matters within my own knowledge and experience. On many points, the information I possessed was unavoidably imperfect, and I have therefore been obliged to draw upon the evidence of others; to depend sometimes upon hearsay testimony; and now and then, but not often, for investing the story with due coherence, to resort to something of surmise. Still, in all essential particulars I am prepared to maintain the accuracy of my recital. And I have set forth nothing that has not undergone a grave process of sifting, inquiry, and deliberation.

Alarm was freely expressed at the "Salutation" lest my uncle, justly offended by the attack of Royster, should thenceforward shun that establishment, and bestow his patronage upon some other tavern. There was even talk of apprising him, by means of a round-robin or otherwise, that the conduct of Royster met with no sort of approval from the general frequenters of the "Salutation," who heartily sympathised indeed with their old friend Mr. Strangways under the grievances he had so patiently endured. Nothing of the kind was done, however; for my uncle was found in possession of his chimney-corner seat on evenings subsequent to Royster's misbehaviour, manifesting his wonted composure, and just for all the world as though no such unpleasant incident had occurred. Royster was present, but bore himself becomingly, and trifled no more with my uncle's name, or with the details of his private life. The offender was perhaps satisfied with the boldness he had displayed in outraging propriety; or had been made to understand that the company would not brook any further action of his in the same direction. Altogether, peace

and harmony were fairly re-established at the "Salutation."

And just at this time certain public topics came under discussion, almost to the extinction of talk upon minor and private matters. They were furious politicians at the "Salutation;" they held strong opinions, and they proclaimed them vehemently. They were implacable zealots and impassioned partisans. Happily, they were all of one way of thinking; for, to them, political opponents were as personal enemies, to be vindictively attacked and harassed wherever and whenever encountered. There is no need to trespass upon history, and to refer particularly to the events which so stirred my uncle and his associates. Suffice it to say, that towards a certain parliamentary personage—whom they alluded to as "Lord John," when they did not, as more generally happened, prefer to apply to him some scurrilous pseudonym—on account of his perpetration or accomplishment, at this period, of political iniquities or public benefactions, accordingly as opinions differed—they entertained the most embittered sentiments, and gave these words to a very extravagant

extent. My uncle took his full share in these proceedings; and, in regard to virulent abuse and animadversion, I must say that I think he could go as far, and distinguish himself as markedly, as most men. His angry oratory demanded sustenance, perhaps, but scarcely the stimulation of extra glasses of punch. He consumed these, however, and presently fell very ill indeed. He was confined to his room, stricken with fever, attended by rheumatic and gouty complications of a really critical nature.

For many weeks he was a helpless invalid, but by no means a patient one. His illness angered him strangely. He was provoked at his own infirmity, and at its consequences in the way of medical attendance, nursing, and physic. He seemed to think some kind of conspiracy existed to take advantage of his sickness, and to make him out to be worse than he really was. Such little strength as he now possessed he was inclined to waste unwisely in abortive efforts to rise from his bed and resume his ordinary occupations. At times, his mind gave way, and he was plainly delirious. He

grossly insulted his physician, and expressed the most acrid distrust of the conduct and designs of his housekeeper. The doctor did not mind this in the least, but poor Mrs. Brocklebank was deeply distressed, and had indeed a hard time of it. Still, she was unremitting in serving and aiding her suffering master.

The Simkinsons, of course, were anxiously active in the matter. For some time, indeed, Mrs. Simkinson took up her abode in the Buildings, that she might the better tend and care for the ailing head of the firm. In the emergency, Mr. Strangways' old prejudices were promptly disregarded. It was not possible for him now, as he had once threatened, to go out of one door as Simkinson's wife entered at the other. Perhaps he hardly knew what had happened; certainly, he was quite passive in the matter, and made no objection to the presence of Mrs. Simkinson. He seemed the better for it, indeed. He was calmer and more patient when she was beside him, refrained from the use of unpleasant language, took his medicine quietly from her hands, and was generally obedient to her

behests. And the lady shone as a nurse. Simkinson grew prouder of her than ever. She smoothed the sick man's pillows for him, and soothed his aching brows by the light touch of her cool soft palm. Her voice was musical, and her movements gentle. The doctor complimented her liberally upon her gifts and attainments as a nurse. "I'm sure we shall do, now that you've come to help us, Mrs. Simkinson," he said, with a bow. "But I don't think we could possibly have got on without you."

"Poor gentleman, he's very ill still, I fear, Dr. Porter," she said.

"His state is still somewhat precarious, no doubt," observed the doctor. "And you see, he's not so young as he was. We can't expect age to bear up against such an attack as this very readily. And I fancy he has something on his mind. But still, I really think he's mending. Thanks to you, Mrs. Simkinson. I—really—do—think—he's—mending." And the doctor said this in a measured staccato way, that was certainly, as he designed it should be, very reassuring and comforting.

Something on his mind? His will, perhaps. Very likely. It was understood that he had sent for his solicitor, Mr. Dunstable, of Fenchurch Buildings, who had conferred for some time with his client. The exact disposition he had made of his property was not, of course, disclosed. Mr. Dunstable was not a man likely to commit any breach of professional confidence. Still, the solicitor had encountered the doctor, away from the sick-room, and some few words these functionaries had interchanged were almost to be regarded as of a public nature. At least, no attempt was made to invest them with any privileged or secret character.

"You find our poor friend's mind pretty steady?" said the doctor quietly, rather as though he were soliciting an opinion in aid of his medical judgment of the case, than as though moved at all by curiosity of an equivocal sort.

"Quite so, I think. There can be no question, I take it, of his perfect competency for testamentary purposes."

"None whatever, I should say. But he *has*

rambled, no doubt; and perhaps a long interview, a sustained consideration of his affairs might, in his present weakly state, strain his faculties a little too severely. But you would have observed if anything of that kind had occurred."

"Precisely. I have only been taking his instructions. There must necessarily occur some little delay in preparing the document for his execution. But I have myself no doubt that he is in sufficient possession of his mental powers. His expressions were perfectly lucid. Some questions he asked were certainly curious, but I could not take upon myself to say that they were otherwise than pertinent to the case."

"Might one, without impropriety, with a view to information as to the patient's state, inquire as to the nature of those questions? I mean, of course, only in a general way. There is no necessity to enter into details. You understand me, I'm sure."

"Well, his inquiries were directed as to the possible voiding of his will by marriage. He desired information on that head."

"Ah, he mentioned marriage, did he?"

"Yes; and whether a will being so voided, it could be validated again, after marriage, by the execution of a short codicil confirming its provisions, and so on—an inquiry to that effect. I briefly explained to him the legal view of the matter; especially stating that a marriage usually so altered a man's position, in regard to providing for the widow and possible offspring, and so forth, that an entirely new arrangement was practically and generally the more convenient and expedient course."

"But there was nothing in that inquiry——"

"Oh dear no; nothing at all of a suspicious character—it was a perfectly reasonable, and indeed proper inquiry. Of a later subject he mentioned, I am not so clear. It was certainly eccentric."

"Might one venture——" The doctor's looks implied a repetition of his former interrogation.

"He asked as to the possibilities of a man's being married without his knowing it—involuntarily—in spite of himself, in fact."

"That was curious."

"No doubt. But one need hardly attach much importance to it. It was towards the end of our conference, and he betrayed some signs of fatigue. We shall see, of course, how he is when we've prepared the engrossment for execution. It shall be put in hand at once. But, I take it, there is no absolute urgency now? No immediate danger?"

"Oh dear no. I really think we shall pull through. Still, his age—"

"Just so.—Good morning, Dr. Porter."

"Good morning, Mr. Dunstable. Happy, I'm sure, to have met you."

There were other interviews between these two worthy practitioners of law and physic. Mr. Strangways' will was duly prepared and executed, Mr. Dunstable and an articulated clerk from his office being the attesting witnesses. The testator, though improved in health, was still confined to his bed, and his signature lacked somewhat of its usual firmness. But the will was read over to him, and its terms fully explained by the solicitor; there

could be no doubt that he understood and approved it, and it seemed to be agreed that his mental capacity was beyond dispute. Still, on this subject it was known that the solicitor and the doctor had held further converse.

"It's a crotchet, of course, a harmless crotchet," Mr. Dunstable was heard to say, "but it's curious how he harps upon it."

"But, after all, as I understand the matter," observed Dr. Porter, "this crotchet of his, or fancy, call it what you will, has not really affected the arrangements he has made?"

"No; but he is strangely persistent about the matter. He dwells much on the prospect of his will being revoked by marriage, and instructs me to be prepared to revive it again by re-execution, or by means of a special codicil. Still, I see no evidence—no shadow of evidence—in this of deficient capacity to make a will. That is your view, I take it?"

"Most certainly. It looks as though he contemplated marriage—that's the utmost that can be said. A man arrived at his period of life does

not ordinarily do that, perhaps; but——" The doctor shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"Just so," said Mr. Dunstable. "The law takes the insane under its charge, but it doesn't concern itself with the foolish."

"Or what would become of the lawyers?" asked the doctor pleasantly.

"Or the doctors?" grinned the lawyer.

They were much in the position of the two soothsayers, supposed to be unable to maintain their gravity in the presence of each other.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD BAT.

MR. STRANGWAYS rallied, and was soon pretty nearly himself again; a suspicion, however, prevailing among his friends that there was something still weighing upon his mind, and that his recent indisposition had not been merely physical. But he was now decidedly better, and seemed to be gaining strength daily. He resumed his ordinary ways of life. He had been recommended to try change of air, and to pass a few weeks at the seaside. This he declined to do. He had not for many years gone far from the neighbourhood of Mole's Buildings, and he expressed great objection to being, as he said, removed to strange places at his time of life. But he made

some concession to medical counsel: he now took a morning constitutional walk in the Tower Moat or the garden of the adjoining square. In the evening, he resumed his place at the "Salutation," exercising, perhaps, more moderation than formerly in regard to his consumption of its liquors. Once or twice, too, he dined at his partner's house in Doughty Street. These entertainments had passed off satisfactorily. It was evident that Mrs. Simkinson enjoyed a secure place in my uncle's favour. He invariably addressed her as "my dear," and kissed her whenever he met or parted from her. To all inquiries concerning his state of health, Mr. Strangways was now apt to reply somewhat petulantly that he was as well as he had ever felt in his life, if not better, and that he thought, upon the whole, his illness had rather done him good than otherwise.

Nevertheless, his housekeeper candidly delivered her opinion that my uncle was very much shaken—that he was no more the man he had been—that a very decided change had come over

him. So spoke Mrs. Brocklebank, who certainly had good opportunities of forming conclusions upon the subject. "He's changed, sir," she would say. "I can't describe it otherwise. Mr. Strangeways, sir, if you'll kindly mark my words, isn't what he used to be. It isn't what I'd speak of to any that wasn't of the family, as I may say, sir. But he's odd, sir, that's what he is. He's got into a way of looking at me, sir—that isn't so much looking at me, as eyeing me all over; and it isn't at all as it used to be. He's sharp with me at times, but not often. I know his ways pretty well now, sir, and ought to, seeing the number of years I've lived in this house. He likes to be served quick and ready-like, without need to be always giving orders and reminding; and so he is, sir, and always has been. I don't think he's a complaint to make of me on that score. I know my duties, and I do them regularly, like clockwork, if I may so speak. He don't like worry, and he isn't worried. He has his own way, and he's made as comfortable as may be; and what more can a gentleman ask for? But he

seems suspicious of me—I don't know what else to call it, and at times looks at me quite timid and scared-like. And then he'll question me as to Brocklebank, and when he died, and whether I don't feel very lonely as a widow, and—it isn't joking—he's as serious as Job himself the while—whether I ever think of getting married again, and so on. It would be like impudence, or what they call *chaff*, in a younger gentleman; but, of course, I couldn't think that of Mr. Strangways, whom I've known and worked for these years and years."

Mrs. Brocklebank blushed as she spoke, and wore an embarrassed air. She pressed her hand upon her left side, as though to stay the too turbulent beating of a heart which yet, one would think, must have enjoyed sufficient space for the most active movements in the ample form that encased it. Mr. Royster, it may be remembered, had proclaimed Mrs. Brocklebank to be a fine woman—had, indeed, warmly dared any man to contradict his statement. She was something more than middle-aged, and the slim symmetry

of youth was hers no more. But she bore with ease and address the burden time had cast upon her; and there was nothing uncomely in the increased solidity of configuration with which the fleeting years had endowed her. The plump firmness of her face offered a good resistance to the efforts of age to score and hollow it; and though threads of grey robbed the neat bunch of short crisp ringlets she wore upon either temple of something of their original brown lustre, her eyes were as dark and bright, and her lips as rosy, as they had been even in the sunniest days of her girlhood. Cased in her newest black silk dress, crowned with her Sunday cap, a structure rather of the Flamboyant style of architecture—a lace collar round her neck, which was short, but of great circumference—and a gold-rimmed Scotch pebble brooch affixed to her chest, and rising and falling with it, like a small ship rocking upon a wide expanse of ocean, Mrs. Brocklebank was an impressive, even an attractive figure. Her manners were homely, but they were cordial and pleasant. She had, as she avowed, seen some troubles, but

these had in no way embittered her disposition or prejudiced her views of life. Altogether, she was a thoroughly genial, good-natured, and comfortable sort of creature. And I have always understood that her conduct and character as a housekeeper were quite beyond impeachment.

How it happened that a rumour to the effect that my uncle proposed to marry his housekeeper, obtained expression, and form, and circulation, I cannot state. Rumours can rarely be traced to their origin. They are as the natural children of unseemly gossip and scandal, and cannot be expected to boast a distinct pedigree, or to possess decent parentage. But some such report did prevail, greatly to the disturbance of Mr. Strangways' friends and relatives. They expressed extreme anxiety on the subject. They referred to my uncle in terms which intermingled fear and surprise, scorn and pity, in nice proportions. They now invariably spoke of poor Mrs. Brocklebank—to whom they had at one time addressed themselves in a most conciliatory and complimentary way—as “that woman.” Language failed to convey the full

measure of the abomination with which they now regarded her.

Simkinson, to do him justice, made very light of the matter. When spoken to as to the possibilities of my uncle's marriage, he simply asked, "Why shouldn't he marry?" Applied to for information, he averred that he had none to give. Besought to stir himself, and do what he might to hinder such a distressing proceeding, he resolutely declined to interfere. "I pleased myself; why shouldn't he?" "But—his housekeeper!" people urged. "A most worthy woman," he observed. "I've known her these many years. If Strangways likes to marry her—let him. She's a good soul, and I've the greatest respect for her. I don't see why she shouldn't make him an excellent wife. And if he does marry her, all I can say is, that I hope Mrs. Simkinson and myself may often have the pleasure of Mr. and Mrs. Strangways' company at dinner in Doughty Street. Let me add, that my dear wife is quite of my way of thinking in the matter." It was clear that there was no doing anything with Simkinson. He was true and stanch as ever;

governed by the fundamental principle of his life, that the head of the firm could do no wrong, and must invariably be supported in all he did.

For my part, I was young, and youth, if often inconsiderate, is scarcely ever mercenary. It enjoys the present too much to trouble itself greatly about the future. I did not pause to think how much my prospects of benefit from my uncle's wealth might be obstructed by his taking unto himself a wife; how greatly the liberality of his marriage settlement might hinder the generosity of his will from flowing in my direction. In short, I looked upon the whole thing as neither more nor less than "a lark." I employ the slang term, which then seemed to me most appropriately to describe the situation. My language and my opinions have acquired sobriety since that date.

Meanwhile, it was doubtful whether my uncle was fully informed of the reports spread abroad in relation to him and his intentions. Interrogation of him was not, of course, to be thought of for a moment. Nor do I think that any questions were addressed directly to Mrs. Brocklebank upon

the subject. People were indeed afraid to whisper, so to say, lest they should bring down upon them an avalanche. They could but wait and watch, hope and fear. To move was possibly to evoke the fury of Mr. Strangways, or to rouse the inimical influence of Mrs. Brocklebank. It was as though they were locked up in a dark china closet; activity might involve the destruction of precious property. There was no help for it but to keep still until some one brought a light and opened the door.

Certainly, about this time Mr. Strangways' conduct, as I am about to show, was curious, if not inexplicable.

There had been for many years in the employment of the firm of Strangways and Simkinson a man intrusted with various important duties in the cellars, who was known uniformly and simply as Bat. Whether this was his christian or surname, or simply a nickname, I am unable to state. He appeared to own no other appellation. Bat enjoyed a good reputation for steadiness and fidelity, and was even said to know more about

his employers' stock-in-trade, its value, quality, and disposition, than they did themselves. But his appearance was not prepossessing. An accident had deprived him of the sight of one eye, which remained partially closed, as though he had been paralysed in the act of winking, and his eyelid had thenceforward been fixed in one position. This misfortune gave something of a tipsy look to his face, enhanced by a certain flush that perpetually imbued his rudely-shaped features, and by his invariable huskiness of speech, attributable, no doubt, to his long occupancy of the firm's cellars, and his habitually breathing an atmosphere heavily laden with vinous fumes. At the same time it was well understood that Bat was not chargeable with intemperance; and that, although in the daylight he wore a dazed and confused air, like an owl in sunshine, in underground regions his faculties were sufficiently clear and alert. It was perhaps unavoidable that cobwebs, and mildew, and mould should cling to him; that the stains of spilt wine should variegate his attire; and that generally what may be called a cavernous odour

should always attend him. He dressed in a corduroy suit, with a rubbed and ragged leathern apron and breastplate; a rectangular brown-paper cap usually crowning him. He was ordinarily to be found in the cellars bearing in his hand a long piece of timber, affixed to which was a swaling blackened stump of tallow-candle, which fitfully illumined the vaults.

As a servant of many years' standing, Bat was supposed to enjoy the peculiar favour and confidence of Mr. Strangways, who rarely passed a day without some brief converse with his old-established cellarman. The fact that Bat's speech and bearing were of an unpolished kind, in no way affected my uncle's view of him, except that it, perhaps, rather promoted a favourable consideration of him; for my uncle, inclined to oddity himself, was well disposed towards a fair measure of it in others.

One day Mr. Strangways and Bat were standing in a sequestered corner of the vaults, just where a very choice hoard of old Madeira had been deposited. Both had been silent for some

minutes, gazing admiringly at the rows upon rows of bottles, revealed in a sort of flickering way by the light wavering of Bat's candle.

"What do you think of Mrs. Brocklebank, Bat?" demanded my uncle suddenly.

"Mrs. Brocklebank?" echoed Bat. At the moment, he thought of her confusedly, less as a woman than as some sort of wine; for they had a way in the cellar of referring to various vintages by the names of their original shippers and importers: thus, they talked of "Potter's Madeira," of "Old Rumbold's," of "Topstone Brothers'"; and so on.

"Is she a fine woman?" Mr. Strangways pursued.

"She may be," said Bat musingly. "Yes—now you mention it, she would perhaps be considered a fine woman. But she's been younger."

"Else she wouldn't be what she is." Which, no doubt, was true. "She's none the worse for age."

"Perhaps not. She's kep' her colour." Bat was perhaps still thinking of wines.

"And she's gained body." Mr. Strangeways' eyes twinkled curiously as he said this.

"I suppose she has," said Bat quite gravely. "That's in her favour."

"Sound and choice, I call her," continued my uncle. "No crust—to any objectionable extent."

"I've no doubt you're right, guv'nor." Here Bat removed his paper cap, and rubbed his bald head with a dingy, stringy-looking handkerchief; his facial expression betrayed that, to his thinking, the conversation had its bewildering side.

"A man might do worse than make her his wife," suggested Mr. Strangeways.

"Perhaps. He might chuck himself off London Bridge."

My uncle blinked. "But if it was made worth his while?"

"It couldn't hardly be," said Bat simply—"not to chuck himself off the bridge. Not unless he was a diver by trade," he added, after a moment's reflection.

"*Marry her!*" whispered my uncle mysteriously, as he clutched Bat's arm.

"Me?"

"You! She's a fine woman. You own it; all admit it. I'll settle a round sum on her. It will be a good thing for you, Bat."

Bat shook himself free of his master's grasp, and staggered back a few paces, shedding round him quite a shower of hot tallow-drops from his swaling candle.

"It couldn't be done," he said, with a kind of gasp.

"Pish! Don't be a fool, Bat. Take another look at her."

"Well, I will. That can't hurt me, anyhow."

"I should think not. As fine a woman as was ever seen. A good round sum, Bat; and an annuity—a very nice annuity—paid quarterly. Bat, do you hear? Quarterly. Think of it, Bat."

"As you've set your mind on it, guv'nor, I will."

"That's right. I'll speak to you again about it, Bat." And they parted.

A day or two later they again chanced to be in the same remote corner of the cellars.

"I've been thinking over that what you talked about t'other day, guv'nor," began Bat.

"And you've looked at her?"

"Yes—I've looked at her. I've nothing to say against her looks." Plainly, Bat regarded these as matters of quite inferior detail. "There's plenty of her; I don't deny that."

"Well?"

"But it's a risk, you know, guv'nor—a precious risk."

"Of course, it's a risk; everything's a risk. It's a risk to put out your hand or your foot; it's a risk to go to bed—you may be burned alive in it; it's a risk to shave—you may cut yourself; it's a risk to wash your face—you may catch cold."

Bat appeared to think these arguments irrelevant, and of little worth. "You see there's the law," he said.

"What's the law got to do with it?"

"The law's agin me, I'm thinking. And when the law's agin a man, it's apt to drop upon him at odd times uncommon heavy."

"Don't talk nonsense, Bat."

"Maybe it's nonsense—I don't say it isn't; but the law calls it *bigamy*."

"*Bigamy!*" It was Mr. Strangways' turn to start back with surprise. "Do you mean to say you've got a wife already?"

"Well, I have, and children; and that's the truth."

"You scoundrel!" cried my uncle in a passion; "you've always said you were single."

"I have; I don't deny it. You were always so partikler hard-mouthed about married men; and you give it tongue too—it's made me shiver to hear you, at times. And Mr. Simkinson, he was pretty near as bad. Whether he's changed his opinion now he's married hisself, is more than I can tell you. There's some as marries and likes it; and there's some as marries and only pretends to like it, because they wouldn't have folks jeering at 'em. Perhaps there's more of the last than the first. But I ain't called upon to speak to that. As I said, I'm married myself, for good or bad. Because of your way of going on, I kep' it from you—bottled up, as I may say; but now the cork's

out. You've screwed the truth from me. If you don't like the taste of it, I don't know as I can help it."

"You're a scoundrel, Bat!" my uncle repeated.

"Now, look here, guv'nor!" cried Bat appealingly. "Don't let's have no quarrelling, nor no ill blood between us, after all these long years of peace and good-will; it wouldn't be right. I want to act fair, and do what I can to make things pleasant. Only say the word, and let's have the matter square before us. Are you so much set upon having me marry this here Mrs. Brocklebank? Will you stand by me if I do it? I won't say that the bit of money and that there annuity you spoke of don't tempt me, because, perhaps, when all's told, it do. I'm poor—I don't care who knows it—and money's a object to me. Still, it isn't only that. If so be that you desire it, and will promise to abide by me and help me through the consequences, there, as I'm an honest man, I'll risk it; I'll marry the woman. And if the law likes to call it bigamy, or what not—why, let it, that's the law's affair, and I don't care—no, not a pinch of snuff for it."

At this iniquitous proposal, Mr. Strangways, with an oath, pushed his cellarman away from him, and furious with passion, quitted the wine-vaults.

Bat's bewilderment was extreme. His offer—shameful as it was—had been made in perfect good faith; it was, in the main, begotten of his desire to oblige his master, although some regard for self-interest no doubt possessed him. Still, he seemed to appreciate the fact that the course of conduct he suggested had its perils as well as its profits. Altogether, I think he was chiefly influenced by a kind of feudal fidelity he cherished towards his employer. For some time he seemed incapable of speech, or even of thought.

"That's the worst of gentlefolks," he murmured at length; "there's no understanding them, and there's no pleasing of them."

He shook himself like a wet dog, by way of rousing his faculties to a keener and more collected sense of his situation. Presently his face brightened; it was almost as though an idea had occurred to him.

CHAPTER VII.

WANTED—A HUSBAND.

It was rather late at night. My uncle was returning home from the "Salutation." He had entered the quadrangle of the Buildings, and was approaching his own door, when he encountered a policeman. Now it was plain to Mr. Strangeways that the policeman had just issued from the premises of the firm.

"What's the matter, policeman?" demanded my uncle.

"Well, sir, there's nothing the matter to signify," answered the constable. He was evidently embarrassed, but he touched his hat respectfully to my uncle. In those days, the policemen had not long been invented or discovered.

He did not then affect a military bearing, and knew nothing of helmets. He wore the chimney-pot hat of civil life. The picturesque luxury of a moustache was not permitted him; but he had full license to cultivate his whiskers to even an excessive degree. Of this privilege the policeman under mention had freely availed himself. Nature had been liberal, and the arts of cultivation had not been spared. His whiskers were of rich and abundant growth. Altogether, indeed, he was a fine specimen of the force: a man of many inches, of stalwart frame, and grand proportions generally. His feet might seem to be of unusual and unsymmetrical dimensions; but this was no doubt owing to the redundant capaciousness of his boots.

"Is it thieves?" inquired my uncle.

"Oh dear no, sir," said the constable. "Thieves won't come here, sir; they know better than that."

"You're new to this beat, I think?"

"Well, I am, sir; only lately been put on it. But you've no call to be timorous about thieves,

sir. I'll see you ain't troubled in that way. Trust me for that, sir."

"But you came out of my house?" The policeman hesitated.

"Well, I did, sir. I don't deceive you," he said, at length.

"Anything wrong? Fastenings insecure? Door left open?"

"No, sir, nothing of that sort. But—— Well, sir, there ain't a morsel of harm in it. I'd just looked in for a moment to say a word to Mrs. Brocklebank—and that's the truth, sir."

Mr. Strangways seemed to take new interest in the conversation.

"Mrs. Brocklebank?" he said eagerly. "You know her?"

"I do, sir. She's been a kind friend to me, has Mrs. Brocklebank."

"A fine woman?" said Mr. Strangways interrogatively.

"She's all that, sir. A first-class woman, I call her."

"And you looked in to say a word to her?"

"I did, sir. I don't deceive you. I was hardly there above a minute—just to ask how she was, sir—and—there—I don't want to conceal nothing—I did have just a half glass of ale—or it might be a whole one. I'm plain and above-board—it's my way—and it's hers too. There was no harm meant, sir, when all's told, and I hope there's no offence taken.—Thank you, sir." The policeman again touched his hat, and he slipped something into his pocket. My uncle had given him a sovereign.

"A man might do worse than marry Mrs. Brocklebank," observed Mr. Strangways.

"He might, sir, and that's the truth," said the policeman. "She's young still, considering, and as active as a cricket. I never knew a woman wear better, and I've noticed a many of 'em in my time. A policeman gets to notice things, you see; it's part of his business."

"She'd make any one a good wife?" remarked Mr. Strangways, still with an interrogative air.

"She would so, sir. There's been, as I may

say, a good wife a-going a-begging in Mrs. Brocklebank this many a long year."

"Marry her!" said my uncle abruptly.

"Marry her?" repeated the policeman, starting back.

"Marry her! I'll make it worth your while."

"Lor' bless you, sir, *she's my aunt!* It couldn't be, you know." My uncle staggered. "I see how it is," muttered the constable—"the old gent's overtook." Aloud, he added: "Take my arm, sir. Let me bear a hand. Gently over them doorsteps, and mind the scraper. Easy does it. Shall I knock or ring?" It is plain that he held my uncle to be, in the crude language of the force, "drunk and incapable."

Mr. Strangways regained his self-command. He declined firmly the policeman's proffer of aid, and bade him good-night.

"A sudden giddiness, I suppose," mused the departing constable. "Summut disagreed with him. I thought him screwed, but I dunno as he was, though his talk was queer. Marry my aunt!

That would be a rum start. I hope I ain't offended him. Anyhow, he's give me a sovereign."

"Mrs. Brocklebank," said Mr. Strangways as he received his candlestick from the hands of his housekeeper—"there must be an end to this. It can't go on. People talk. It's becoming a public scandal. You must get married!"

"Me, sir?"

"One of us must; and you're the youngest. People's mouths must be stopped with a marriage certificate."

She looked at him anxiously. Was he mad? His manner was not unduly excited or irrational. Was he joking? His facial expression was as grave as that of the most sober and solemn of judges.

"But who's to marry me—at my time of life, Mr. Strangways?" she asked rather wildly.

"If that's the only difficulty," he said, "a husband shall soon be found for you; I'll see to that. So, mind, it's a settled thing. Good night."

"But," she cried desperately, "if he shouldn't suit?"

"He *shall* suit—he *must* suit. Things can't go on as they're going. It's a settled thing. Good night."

"Will you have the warming-pan?" she asked, still mindful of her duties, though her faculties were in a strangely disturbed state.

"D—— the warming-pan!" he cried, as he mounted the stairs with inordinate haste.

She burst into tears. "What's come to him?" she asked herself. "Why does he want me married? Surely he's beside himself. To talk to me—like that—at my age, after all my years and years of service!" she sobbed piteously. "What's put it into his head? Scandal and talk, indeed! I'd scandal and talk 'em, if I had my way! Why can't they let an honest woman alone?" Her distress turned towards anger, and so became more supportable; for, as a rule, grief is enfeebling, while wrath is a stimulant.

"Yes; she must get married, that's certain," meditated Mr. Strangways in the seclusion of his chamber. "Married—but to whom? Mar-

riage is easily said—but who's to be the husband?"

Who, indeed? It was plain there could be no marrying of Mrs. Brocklebank unless a husband was provided for her.

CHAPTER VIII.

YOUNG BAT.

"Beg pardon, sir." Bat, the cellarman, was touching his cap to my uncle with an unusual demonstration of reverence.

"I've nothing to say to you, you vagabond," observed Mr. Strangways gruffly. They were once more in a retired part of the cellars.

"If you'd kindly give me a moment, sir. I was wrong the other day; I own it. There; I'm ashamed of myself, right down ashamed, I am."

"So you ought to be." And my uncle turned away.

"But, if you'd kindly listen a bit; I think it could be managed."

"You think *what* could be managed?"

"Well, that there tackling of Mrs. Brocklebank."

Mr. Strangways paused, and regarded Bat very fiercely, shaking at him menacingly a rigid forefinger.

"If you venture upon another of your shameful, villainous, bigamous propositions, by Heaven, Bat, I'll knock you down; or," continued my uncle after a moment's reflection, "I'll send for a policeman, and give you in charge. Now, I've warned you; so, take care."

"I *am* a-taking care, guv'nor," said Bat. He found the interview promised to be warm, and took to polishing his bald head with his ragged handkerchief, by way of gaining time for deliberation. "I ain't a-speaking of myself this time. I was wrong to do it afore. But you was so uncommon sudden with me, that it was as bad as drink for muddling me. I don't mean myself, this time. But there's another party as is agreeable. And if you're still so hot on the thing as you was t'other day, well, it can be managed; that's all I got to say."

"What do you mean?"

"Look here, guv'nor; no getting me in a corner again, and hitting me foul. Let's have it straight-forrards between us. Do you want that there Mrs. Brocklebank married sharp, right off the reel, that's the question; yes or no?"

"Suppose I do?"

"And you'll keep true about the bit of money you promised?"

"Certainly."

"Then the job's done. There's a husband ready waiting for her."

"Who is he?"

"My son!"

"I didn't know you had a son."

"That's just it. You didn't know I had a wife. I told you how your wiolet goings-on had forced me to keep them matters dark. There's others in your employ in the same plight, maybe, but I ain't one to split on 'em. If they've deceived you, pretending to humour your precious whims and fancies, it's no affair of mine. Find it

out for yourself, if you're a mind to. When the clock pints to marriage," cried Bat, waxing eloquent, "you may shove the hands back, or muffle the bell, so as there's no hearing it strike, but there's no altering the time of day. That keeps true, and goes straight on, whatever you may say or do."

My uncle's face twitched. He was impressed, perhaps, by this forcible, if rather obscure figure of speech. Bat himself seemed surprised at his own oratorical effort. He waited a moment while he descended, as it were, from metaphorical heights to the level of plain speech again.

"So, I'm married," he said, "as I told you. I've a wife, and a family. My eldest boy he's growed up, and he'll marry Mrs. Brocklebank, gladly. You know him well enough."

"I know him?"

"Yes. He's Jim, the under-carter. There, now, you know."

"That boy, your son?"

"Yes. Leastways, I've believed so all these years, and I ain't going to doubt it now. And

he ain't a boy. He's growed up. I don't know as he's one a woman need be proud of as a husband; that's as tastes go. But he's agreeable to marry—if it's asked of him; and the bit of money would come in handy to him; and if husbands is pertikly wanted, why not Jim as well as any one else?"

"But he's a lazy, idle rascal. I don't know why we've kept him so long."

"You wouldn't, perhaps, if you'd knowed he was my son. He was took on out of charity, a'most. You thought him a orphan. Mr. Simkinson did, I know, and took uncommon notice of him at one time, till he came to have other things to think of—his wife, and his West-end house, and what not. I don't want to be a-deceiving of you. It ain't my way at all, if I'm let alone. You druv me to it. What can a man do but play artful when there's so much nasty temper going about?"

"But the boy's a fool!"

"That ain't against him as a husband, surely?"

Mr. Strangways took snuff assiduously.

"But he's too young."

"He'll grow older every day." My uncle couldn't gainsay that. "Besides," continued Bat, "age is a matter of fancy. Mrs. Brocklebank mayn't object to his want of years. It's her to decide, you know."

"She's old enough to be his mother."

"That don't matter, if she ain't his mother. There's wives as likes to look in a sort of motherly way at their husbands. And there's wives as counts themselves ever so much younger for having a young husband; and it's pleasant to a woman to think herself younger than she really is; take my word for it, guv'nor."

"Bat, you're a confounded, thorough-going, wily, wheedling scoundrel!"

"Well, you see, sir, I've been a many years in your employ; I couldn't help picking up something or other on a heap of subjects."

My uncle's face twitched again.

"For this good-for-nothing boy——"

"Don't say good-for-nothing, guv'nor. He'd make a fairish husband. He ain't good for much, I'll own; but Jim ain't all bad. He don't like hard work; but then he's been a growing lad, and

doing. He's allays running his head against posts, is father."

"Don't you want to get married, then?"

"Don't care to so very much. Still, I ain't pertikler. If *she* wants it, and *he* wants it, and *you* wants it—and father as good as swore you did—I don't see as I'm called on to stand out. There's a bit of money, father says; I'd like that, of course; any fool would."

"You've seen *her*."

"I've seen *her* fast enough." Jim was curiously studying his boots as he spoke. He seemed to be impressed by the discovery that they were in a less perfect state of repair than he could have desired.

"And what do you think of *her*?"

"I dunno as I've thought about *her* at all."

"She's a fine woman," said my uncle.

"Is she?" Jim asked simply.

"She's thought so," said Mr. Strangways with a perplexed air.

"I'll take your word for it, sir."

"You'll marry *her*, then?"

"Well, yes. There don't seem any help for it.

I'll do as I'm bid; that's what I'm here for, and to make myself useful. It's all one to me. I don't care to be upsetting father. He's given all his mind to it, father has. He ain't a pleasant man to upset, father isn't. So there, as I'm called on, I'm ready. As I must, I will. I can't say fairer than that."

"Very good." And my uncle, not wholly satisfied with this converse, was turning away.

"Only," cried Jim after him, "summun else must do the talking, and kind of break it to her, like. I can't do that; it ain't in me. I shouldn't know how to set about it, and I should make a mess of it, for certain. I'm a rare hand at putting my foot into it, as father tells me times and times, and clouts me over the ear for it, as though I could help it. Father or summun must manage it; that's plain as can be. It ain't for the likes of a rough cove like me to be talking flummery and that, and going on ever so with all sorts of gammon to get round a high and mighty old lady like that."

Jim was breathless with excitement and the

length of his speech. One longer, or so long, he had never previously delivered.

"Old lady!" cried my uncle. "Why, she's to be your wife."

"Maybe. I've said I'm ready, and I don't go from my word. Still, she's an old lady, and I couldn't do the talking; I never could. Not to a gal of my heart and my own years, I couldn't; at least I don't think I could. But to her, no; don't expect it of me; I couldn't do it. Father must, or summun," Jim repeated.

"I'll see about it."

My uncle's strange plan of finding, at all hazards, a husband for Mrs. Brocklebank was not in a very thriving state. And it must be said of it, that it did not deserve to thrive. It was indeed conceived in a tyrannical and odious spirit. Still, he was a persistent man: he was far from abandoning his scheme. He was quite aware that this wretched youth Jim, the under-carter, was not an eligible husband for a woman of Mrs. Brocklebank's years and position. Nevertheless, Mr. Strangways appeared to be resolved to carry his plan to com-

pletion by sheer strength of will and assertion of despotic power.

"Mrs. Brocklebank," he said in his sharpest tones, "I've secured a husband for you. You will marry the young man called Jim, the under-carter."

"What! that raw boy?" cried Mrs. Brocklebank, with indignant surprise.

"He's a most respectable young man: the son of our old servant Bat, the head cellarman. He'll make you an excellent husband. I shall take care to have a proper settlement made, and to tie up your money securely for your separate use, and free from his control. Your husband will remain in the employment of the firm. You will be married as soon as possible. That will do. There is not another word to be said on the subject."

"I marry that child, Mr. Strangways? Never, sir!"

"What?"

"Never, sir! I've lived here many years, it is true, but I've lived here too long, since I've lived

here to be insulted like this. No, sir! Marry a boy like that? No, sir! Not if you were to go down on your bended knees to me, and beg and pray me to, I wouldn't! I'll not disgrace myself, sir; I never have yet, and I won't begin now. At my time of life, indeed, to think of such a thing! No, sir! I'm a respectable, hard-working woman, Mr. Strangways, and I've always sought to do my duty by you. I've deserved better treatment at your hands, sir—I have indeed, sir. I've seen troubles, sir, and suffering and sickness, and Brocklebank wasn't perhaps the comfort to me he might have been. But I've done nothing to be ashamed of, and I've given no one cause or right to insult me. A light thing wouldn't have parted us, sir, and I'm one as can put up with a good deal. And, as I may say, I've learned to bear things in your service, sir. But I'll not rake up the past. Still, there's things as no decent woman as respects herself can put up with. And I can't be spoken to like this. I can't be settled for, and married right off without a word, to the first man as passes. Man, indeed! He ain't a man. I'll go, sir, if

you please. You'll suit yourself with another housekeeper."

"You mean—immediately?" asked my uncle.

"I won't inconvenience you, Mr. Strangways. But, if you please, I'll go so soon as ever you're suited with another party. And the sooner the better, I'm bound to add."

"Take time to think of it, Mrs. Brocklebank."

"No, sir, thank you. There's some things as won't bear thinking of, and this is one of them. I'll go, sir, if you please. As to that, my mind's quite made up."

"Very well; as you think best; only there's no hurry, you know, Mrs. Brocklebank; and don't cry, please, Mrs. Brocklebank." My uncle was pale, and in spite of himself somewhat moved. "I meant no unkindness, you know."

"I'm obliged to you for saying so, sir," said the housekeeper, her tears flowing very fast. "I should be loth, indeed, to part unfriendly with one I've known and served so long; and if I've spoke too free, I'm sorry, sir. It was never my way to be other than civil-spoken, whatever

might happen. But the suddenness overtook me. You'll excuse me, sir; and I'll go, sir, if you please, without another word of complaint, sir."

"Very well; only don't cry, Mrs. Brocklebank—don't; there's a good soul." And as though afraid to trust himself with further speech, Mr. Strangways hurried away.

The news of Mrs. Brocklebank's impending departure spread, and occasioned considerable surprise, decidedly mingled with satisfaction, in the minds of Mr. Strangways' relatives. "A good riddance" was—in plain terms—their verdict upon the case. Nothing of this kind, however, was said in my uncle's hearing.

Only Simkinson, indeed, ventured upon a word of any kind bearing upon the subject.

"So you're going to part with Mrs. Brocklebank?" he said.

"Yes."

"It's rather a pity, isn't it?"

"Perhaps so. But it's her own doing."

"I've always entertained the highest opinion of Mrs. Brocklebank."

Mr. Strangways mused. "You admire her, Simkinson?" he asked.

"Certainly. There couldn't be a better house-keeper."

"And you think her a fine woman, maybe?"

"Well, yes; I do. Now you mention it, she is a fine woman."

"You've no doubt about it?"

"None whatever."

"Yes; as you say, it's a pity. But it's her own doing."

"You'll miss her very much."

"Just so; I must manage as well as I can: there's plenty of fish in the sea, you know; and—she's not gone yet."

That was all that passed between the partners concerning Mrs. Brocklebank. With that lady herself Mr. Strangways held no converse; but he moved no more in the matter of finding a husband for her. It was understood that the pretensions he had put forth on behalf of Bat's son Jim, the under-carter, were wholly abandoned; and that she was to quit Mole's Buildings at an early

period. She was indeed busily engaged in making preparations for her departure. It was not clear, however, that Mr. Strangways had made arrangements with any one to fill her place as his house-keeper.

CHAPTER IX.

"CALL ME JOSEPH."

COMING home late one night from the "Salutation," my uncle noticed two or three corded boxes standing in his hall. He looked inquiringly at Mrs. Brocklebank as she handed him his chamber candlestick.

"They're mine, sir," she said. "I thought of leaving to-morrow morning after breakfast, sir, if you've no objection. I'm not very well, sir, and I'm going to stay a few days at Brixton with a married niece of mine—her husband's in the veneering trade—a respectable, well-to-do man. The change will do me good, perhaps."

"You're not really ill, Mrs. Brocklebank?"

"I'm but poorly, sir, I own; I am not so

strong as I once was." She sighed as she spoke. Presently she resumed. "I've been through the china, plate, and linen, sir—you'll find all as it should be, sir, allowing for wear and tear."

"I'm quite content. I've perfect confidence in you; I'd take your word for a thousand pounds, Mrs. Brocklebank. You've been an excellent housekeeper to me: more than that—a friend, a good, faithful friend."

He gave her back the candlestick to hold, while he searched for his handkerchief with rather trembling hands. He moved towards one of the boxes, and sat down upon it, while he dabbed his forehead.

"You're kind to say so, Mr. Strangways; but you always were kind—I shall never think otherwise." Her voice shook, and there was plainly a tear coursing down her plump face. "I'll leave my address, sir, if you please; and, if any question should arise—about the things at the wash, for instance—washerwomen are often so provoking, if you'll only send to me——"

"Don't go!" he said, starting up. "Stay;

there's a dear soul—stay. You will, won't you? Not as Mrs. Brocklebank—I don't mean that—but as Mrs. Strangways—as my wife. Marry me!"

"Sir!"

"I mean it. I'm quite serious; I'm quite sober. Don't go! Marry me! I love you! Shall I kneel at your feet?"

"Please, don't, Mr. Strangways. Oh, what a turn you've given me!"

"I'm old, my dear—but not so very old either. I'll make you a good husband. Say Yes! I'll do all I can to make you happy. Say you'll marry me!"

"Oh, Mr. Strangways!"

"Call me Joseph!" And he kissed her. To my thinking he must have looked much as a veteran jackdaw pecking at an over-ripe pudding-apple.

Mrs. Brocklebank had accepted his suit—so it seemed, although she had uttered no audible words to that effect. Her perturbation was extreme; and the candlestick she still held in her hand was waved and shaken to and fro much after the

manner of Bat's candle in the cellars. It was a mercy she did not set fire to my uncle, or to herself, or to the house.

"Oh, Mr. Strangways——"

"Joseph! Let me hear you say Joseph!"

"Joseph, then. I'm that bewildered, I hardly know where I am."

"You're in my house—your own house; and you're mine. You shan't regret it. You shall be a happy woman. Take away those boxes. No—you're not strong enough. Take off the cords at any rate. Cut them! I can't bear to see them. And you stay here, mind; no going to your married niece at Brixton. Bother your married niece at Brixton, and God bless you!"

And my uncle went upstairs to bed, tremulously, perhaps, but still with a good show of activity. Half-way up he paused, not so much for rest or to gain breath as to look over the banisters, and smile and nod further adieux to the lady who was to be the future Mrs. Strangways.

He was no more to be regarded by himself or by others as a confirmed bachelor; he was now

an engaged man. "Better late than never," he murmured.

The engagement was to be kept a secret; but, like the majority of secrets, it came to be shared by a good many. Nobody affected surprise at the news, which but confirmed general anticipation; and few, I'm bound to add, expressed approval of Mr. Strangways' proceedings.

CHAPTER X.

“LATE! TOO LATE!”

THE ceremony was to have been performed early in the morning, and as privately as possible in the neighbouring church of St. Mungo-down-at-Hill. The necessary license had been obtained, and the clergyman had been duly apprised that his services would be required. Mr. Dunstable had been written to, to the effect that my uncle desired to make a new will, consequent upon the important step he contemplated.

The marriage, however, did not take place!

Upon the morning appointed for his wedding Mr. Strangways was found dead in his bed. The expression of his face was perfectly placid; there was even said to have been something of a smile

upon his lips. Dr. Porter was of course immediately summoned; but his attendance was a mere matter of form. He pronounced that life had been extinct many hours, and that his patient had departed quite painlessly. A subsequent examination demonstrated that Mr. Strangways' death was attributable to "the sudden rupture of a blood-vessel on the brain, from natural causes."

So far as could be ascertained, the deceased had not complained of previous illness. It had been noticed that for a day or two he had looked a little fevered, and that his manner had betrayed some excitement; but these facts were easily to be accounted for under the circumstances of his position. He was about to take a step which was not the less important because it had been deferred to an advanced period of his life. Naturally, he had been anxious, and even somewhat agitated. The bridegroom of whatever age is always a prey to keen emotions. He is in the situation of one risking a large stake upon the turn of a card. He has watched the game for some time, made his due calculations, and has good reason to trust

in the prosperous issue of his venture; still, there is always the possibility of Fortune's betraying him. His wife may prove after all a card, so to speak, of inferior worth or of a wrong suit. For instance, he may have counted upon a diamond and found a club.

Mr. Strangways' demise was as a severe shock to many. Mrs. Brocklebank's distress was in the first instance very acute. There could be no reason to doubt that her suffering was of a genuine sort. Time, however, brought her resignation and composure. On all hands she met with sympathy and respect. Those members of Mr. Strangways' family who had viewed his proposed union with the least approval, decorously cloaked any sense of satisfaction they might have felt that his house-keeper had not been permitted to become his wife. The failure of his project in this respect reinstated Mrs. Brocklebank in their good opinion—whatever that might have been worth.

In later days, Mrs. Brocklebank was herself wont to confess that perhaps things had been ordered for the best. "It was a cruel blow to me,

sir," she would say; "there's no denying it, and I felt it so. At one time I hardly thought I should have lived through it; for though I am not so young as I once was, and my station in life has always been what one would call humble, still, I have my feelings like any other woman. And marriage, let it come when it may—even a second marriage, as mine would have been—flutters us poor women terribly. The very thought of such a thing sets our hearts beating more than can be told; it does indeed, sir. For days and days I was that disturbed and put about, I hardly knew where I was, or what I was saying or doing. Not that I mean to talk of love and that—it would be too ridiculous at my time of life, and seeing all I've gone through—but I respected Mr. Strangeways, poor, dear gentleman. I always did from the first. I'd known him years and years; his will was law to me; and when he asked me——. But there, sir; I can't trust myself to speak of that. But I wasn't fit to be his wife; I know that, sir: our stations was different; and a gentleman like that—for he was a real, true gentleman was

Mr. Strangways—oughtn't to marry out of his own class. And I do assure you, sir, the thought of his marrying me had never once crossed my mind till he mentioned it. I always tried to do my duty by him, and, indeed, by all others—if it isn't boastful of me to say so—and wife or no wife, I'd have gone on content to do the same to the last, sir. But when he asked me, and seemed to have quite made up his mind to it, and to wish it ever so; as, indeed, he seemed to, sir—I wouldn't deceive you if it was otherwise—what could I say or do but what I did? I'm only a woman, sir, when all's said, and we have our weaknesses, as I've never denied. But it all happened for the best, sir, very likely. Things generally do happen for the best, sir, I've noticed, if we'll only look at 'em in the right way. Still, he was taken from us, poor dear, that sudden, it seems to have given one a turn, as I may say, for life. One thing, however: he didn't live to feel ashamed of his wife, as he might have been. Unkind to me he never would have been—not to really mean it; for though sharp in his words and ways at times, he was always good

and sound at heart. But I wasn't his equal; I never could have been—and that might have given him trouble, if he'd been spared. He won't be grieved by such thoughts where he's gone to, sir. He was a dear, good, kind, generous master, and so I shall always think of him. And the mention of his name brings a pain to my heart, so that I can scarcely trust myself to speak, and—you'll excuse me, sir—tears to my eyes, so that I can't hardly see."

Mr. Simkinson's grief, if less demonstrative, was not less genuine than worthy Mrs. Brocklebank's; he deeply mourned the decease of his partner.

"He was a credit to the city of London, sir," Simkinson would say, "to the Vintners' Company, and to the wine trade. His loss is a blow to the firm, such as it must always feel. But even more than that, sir, is to be considered the affliction of his private and personal friends. Among these, sir, I have the honour to claim a foremost place. A more honourable man than my late partner never stepped, sir; nor, I may add, one more intelligent,

punctual, active, and business-like in all his dealings. I shall never cease to regret his loss ; and I may say the same on behalf of Mrs. Simkinson. As partner, friend, and man, he was alike exemplary and admirable ; and I can never expect or presume to hope that I shall look upon his like again."

It was long before Mr. Simkinson could be induced to speak of the closing events of his friend's career ; he feared lest he should be found considering Mr. Strangways in a critical, and therefore, as he held, in an irreverent spirit. One day, however, he permitted himself some remarks, confidentially delivered, bearing upon this subject. These I have thought worth preserving.

"It has sometimes occurred to me," he observed, "that my lamented friend was in some sort a martyr to his own opinions, to his anxiety to maintain his consistency. He had upheld sentiments on certain subjects which, in the end, he found to be erroneous. I had myself supported and shared his views ; but I found them untenable. I take no credit to myself for that. Fortune kindly brought me in the way of the inestimable

lady who did me the honour, subsequently, to become Mrs. Simkinson. I claim no merit for having yielded to a destiny that has proved simply delightful. I never possessed my friend's strength of mind; he was made of sterner stuff than I was. He was persistent and inflexible in what he believed to be right, to an extent I never saw equalled or approached by any man. Still, I can't help thinking that towards the close of his life he saw reason to suspect the soundness of his opinions, or to admit that there might be exceptions to the rules he had laid down. I think he was shaken by the sight—if I may be allowed to allude to such a subject—of the happiness, the remarkable happiness, resulting from the union of Mrs. Simkinson and myself. Gradually it dawned upon him, that, after all—in spite of all he had thought and said—the proper mission of man is marriage. Still, he resisted with all his force the growth of his conviction. He could not but come to know the idle, I may say, the shameful gossip of the neighbourhood—I understand that he was addressed directly and most improperly upon the subject at the

tavern hard by, to which he was accustomed to resort in the evening—in regard to that irreproachable lady, Mrs. Brocklebank. No doubt that if marriage was a probable, or even possible event held in store for him by the future, then Mrs. Brocklebank was the most likely person to enter with him that happy state. So he felt; and, fighting against fate, so to say, he endeavoured to throw every obstacle he could in the way of such a result. I have ascertained that he made various efforts to secure a husband for her in other quarters. These were vain. His opinions were changed; he was shaken by illness; he could hold out no more. He succumbed to circumstances; and ultimately the marriage was arranged to take place. Too late! The struggle had exhausted him; he was worn out, body and mind; and, as you know, he was found dead in his bed upon his wedding morning.”

“And you think that he really liked Mrs. Brocklebank?”

“I think he did. I don’t attribute to my poor, dear friend any excessively romantic notions. He had arrived at a time of life when such things do

not much influence a man; and I doubt if he had ever permitted himself to be much affected in that way. But, reconciled to the idea of marriage, I think he appreciated Mrs. Brocklebank. He respected her; he was accustomed to her; he had known her a great many years; and, without doubt, he rather admired her as a fine woman. Such she has been generally considered for a long time past, and such, you know, she really is, unquestionably. And I have no hesitation in saying that, in my opinion, she would have made him an excellent wife: for she's as sterling a woman as ever lived. The pity of it is that my poor friend was so long in abandoning his mistaken opinions, and in deciding upon changing his condition. So he died as he lived—a bachelor—if a less confirmed bachelor than he had once thought himself to be. Take my word for it," said Simkinson in conclusion, his face beaming with uxoriousness, "marriage is the real panacea—the only genuine *elixir vite*. It isn't for nothing, depend upon it, that *wife* rhymes with *life*; they come together naturally, and it's wicked to think of them apart.

Marry as soon as you can, my dear boy; there's no lack of women about, ready and willing to prove a comfort, and a credit, and a joy to any man; and God bless you and your wife, and may you be as happy as Mrs. Simkinson and myself; more so it would be presumptuous and preposterous to wish any one!"

It only remains to be added that the will Mr. Dunstable had prepared for my late uncle during his severe illness was duly established. If its conditions did not gratify every member of the testator's family—and what will ever does that?—there was yet no pretence for disputing the validity of the instrument. For my part I have always thought that the bequest in my favour might easily have been more liberal in amount; this, however, was not a general opinion. The deceased's wealth was found to be very considerable; and I must say that he appeared to have forgotten no one who had the slightest claim upon his generosity. There were bequests of money and mourning to every clerk and servant in the employ of the firm, with a special gift of a snuff-box to Bat the cellarman.

Simkinson was appointed executor, and handsomely compensated for undertaking that office; Mrs. Simkinson received a noble legacy; and a sum was set apart for the benefit of any children that might be born of her marriage. Finally, a very sufficient annuity was granted to Mrs. Brocklebank, with a free gift of all the furniture and effects, the property of the testator, that might be found at his decease in the house in Mole's Buildings, Tower Street.

**THE STRANGE PROCEEDINGS OF
MRS. SIMCOX.**

THE STRANGE PROCEEDINGS OF MRS. SIMCOX.

CHAPTER I.

THE report that old Mrs. Simcox had married again greatly afflicted and alarmed all her friends and relatives. These she possessed in great numbers. She was thought to be—was indeed known to be—a rich woman. She was of an advanced age, so that, humanly speaking, her demise and a consequent disintegration of her wealth were events that might fairly be expected to occur at no very remote date. It was understood, moreover, that she had absolute power of disposing of her property, and could will it away in this direction or in that, just as she thought

proper. Then she was without children, had no especial pensioners or dependents, and no one of her kindred more than another had any peculiar claims to affectionate and substantial recognition in her will. Consequently, interest in her proceedings, and anxiety as to her movements, were very generally experienced by all those who had the pleasure and, I may say, the responsibility of intimacy with her. Quite a crowd of persons permitted themselves to cherish expectations in relation to the property of Mrs. Simcox; but, while desirous to be on the very best of terms possible with her, they were much less solicitous about friendly or even charitable agreement among themselves. A general tendency possessed them to denounce each other as sordid, mercenary, toadying, self-seeking. Indeed, according to the account of every one of them, Mrs. Simcox's family were about as worthless and despicable a set of creatures as ever existed.

I was one of the nephews of Mrs. Simcox, the son of a married sister of hers, who had been dead some years. Of course I was liable to the

sweeping charges brought against her family by every member of it; and equally, of course, I had entertained ideas of future profit resulting from my relationship with Mrs. Simcox. I had been brought up in what I may call the Simcox faith. From my earliest youth I had been taught to look forward to benefit under the terms of Mrs. Simcox's will. It was always impressed upon me that I must conciliate her in every possible way: that I must labour for her good opinion, humour her caprices, submit to her whims, amuse her, make much of her, and generally bow down to and reverence her. If ever boy was laboriously trained to be a sneak and a sycophant, I was certainly that boy. And there was this additional disadvantage arising from the situation: my hopes of a share in the Simcox property were an excuse to me for all kinds of indolence, folly, and extravagance. All errors on this head I relied upon compensating and retrieving when the time should arrive for my inheriting my share of the Simcox wealth. Nor was I the only member of her family brought up after this deplorable fashion.

Mrs. Simcox lived in the Cathedral Close, Binchester. From her windows she enjoyed a delightful view of the gardens attached to the Episcopal Palace, of the Chapter House, and noble west front of the Minster. The cathedral clock stared her in the face, and the air of the neighbourhood was always musical with the incessant sounding of the cathedral chimes, and perhaps a trifle discordant from the perpetual cawing of the rooks lodged in the belfry tower. Her house was extremely comfortable, rich in antique furniture, soft carpets, and thick curtains. Its only defect, perhaps, was a certain stuffiness of atmosphere. Mrs. Simcox held that fresh air was only another name for dust—the opinion is a very general one—and forbade, upon any pretence whatever, the opening of her casements. A combined scent of sandal-wood, lavender, and dried rose-leaves, stored in large china jars, pervaded the house—the result, however, being perhaps rather more stifling than refreshing.

As to the provisions of Mrs. Simcox's will nothing positive was known; for one reason,

because she was for ever making new dispositions of her property. She was fond of saying that she was "as good as an annuity" to her solicitor, Mr. Quelch, who lived in the High Street, Binchester, five doors from the Market Place: she was so constantly employing him to prepare new wills for her, or to add codicils to existing wills. Will-making, indeed, was one of the chief occupations of her life. She was fond of talking of her intentions in regard to the money she should leave behind her. But then she was never in the same mind for two days together. Now she would encourage one to entertain the most hopeful views of future prosperity; anon she would remit one to a most desperate condition in this regard. She delighted, I think, to keep her expectant relatives on tenter-hooks—perhaps, because in that way she best secured their complete subjection to her. For your expectant legatee is the veriest of servile cravens. *Experto crede.*

We were much troubled with the conflicting rumours that were for ever abroad as to her proceedings and intentions. Now it was said that

she had adopted an orphan from the Binchester poor-house, with the view to constituting the child her sole heir; now that she designed to leave her whole fortune to the fund for restoring Binchester Minster. Now, a cherub-faced minor canon had secured her favour to an alarming extent, it was alleged; now the Binchester Infirmary was to be largely benefited by her bequests. The panic into which these wild and varied reports threw us is not to be expressed. We sought to extract from old Mr. Quelch some tidings of the nature of the latest will he had prepared for Mrs. Simcox's signature; but that experienced practitioner maintained strict professional reticence on the subject. He threw out for our consideration, however, or with the notion of parrying our inquiries, "For all I can say, you know, she may have made another will behind my back; bought one of those confounded cheap printed forms they sell at the stationers, and filled it up herself. She is just the woman to do it." We quite agreed that she was just the woman to do that or any other thing that was preposterous and vexatious.

Our anxiety was extreme. If ever people earned money by distress of mind and the anguish of excessive foreboding and suspicion, then, certainly, Mrs. Simcox's relatives, all and several, earned ten times over a right to her possessions. Meantime, amongst us but little cordiality prevailed. I know that, for the venial offence of sending Mrs. Simcox a barrel of oysters (I own I was aware of her fondness for the mollusc), I was, by the majority of my kindred, deemed deserving of trial at the Old Bailey and a sentence of penal servitude for life. At the same time I confess I thought severely, even savagely, of a near relation of mine, who tried, as it were, to trump my barrel of oysters by forwarding Mrs. Simcox, from London, a colossal cod's head and shoulders. As I observed, if she had been without fortune he would never have troubled himself to send her fish—albeit Binchester, from its inland situation, was but ill supplied with that article of food. Now had she been as poor as she well could be, I should have sent her my oysters all the same. At least, so I said—and so I tried to believe.

The news of Mrs. Simcox's marriage exploded like a shell in our midst. For one, I refused to credit it. However, I thought it as well to institute a search at the Register Office, Somerset House. The books of that valuable institution proved the fact to be beyond question. Mrs. Simcox had certainly been married quite recently to Josiah Pounce, described as being of "full age," and "of the parish of Binchester, gentleman."

CHAPTER II.

Now who could this man Pounce be? An adventurer, an impostor, a designing knave, an unprincipled monster—of that there could be no question. We were all agreed as to the heinous wickedness of Pounce. Indeed, I think that, apart from their desire for Mrs. Simcox's money, her family had never been of one mind except in regard to denunciation and detestation of Pounce. However, it was clear that Pounce had succeeded in his abominable designs. He had made Mrs. Simcox his wife. He would, of course, secure the lion's share of her property. It was very hard upon us, very hard indeed, considering how long we had waited, how assiduously we had toiled, the degradations we had submitted to, the expenses

we had incurred, the time we had wasted, the ingenious artifices we had employed, in our endeavours to conciliate Mrs. Simcox and to profit under her will. It was hardly to be borne. To think that this creature Pounce should step in at the last moment and carry off the prize: triumph over us all! For, of course, now we could expect nothing. He would take good care of that. It was really horrible—it wouldn't bear thinking about.

However, I deemed it well forthwith to start for Binchester. At any rate, I would learn something more about the matter—would ascertain who Pounce was, and by what drugs, what charms, what conjuration, and what mighty magic (for with such proceeding I was tempted to charge him withal) he had won his Desdemona in the person of my aunt, Mrs. Simcox. It was too late in the day, perhaps, to hope for the unmasking and the punishment of Pounce—but if that was any way possible, I was determined upon its accomplishment.

Arrived at the Binchester Railway Station I

drove to the "Crown" Inn. I thought it by no means advisable to proceed straightway to my aunt's residence. It was necessary that I should make preliminary investigations, and see clearly the precise situation of affairs. Strange to say—or, perhaps, not strange to say, all things considered—my first discovery in Binchester was to the effect that divers other members of Mrs. Simcox's family—doubtless engaged on the same errand as myself—had also arrived in that cathedral town. One of these I found was established at the "Red Lion," another at the "Pied Bull," another at the "Peacock" Inn. We all met accidentally in the market-place, and scowled at and cut each other with admirable unanimity, coolness, and promptitude. I need hardly say that we all hated each other with that bitter intensity which distinguishes family enmity.

CHAPTER III.

THOUGH for obvious reasons a woman to be cherished, Mrs. Simcox was hardly, at any rate, during the period of my acquaintance with her, a woman to be loved. She was a fierce, brusque old lady, very difficult to please, and by no means what is called civil spoken. She was fond, as she said, of "speaking her mind," and if the terms she was prone to employ were to be received as specimens of it, it might fairly be inferred that her mind was not one of nice or attractive nature. She was reputed to have possessed great beauty in her youth: unfortunately the same kind of fame has attached to so many uncomely old ladies that one feels disinclined to accept it with absolute and implicit trust. At

the time I knew her, Mrs. Simcox could only by the grossest flattery be described as good-looking. I think with shame now of the abominably complimentary speeches I made from time to time on the subject of Mrs. Simcox's personal appearance. However, a certain measure of favourable comment was, no doubt, justified by the real gorgeousness generally distinguishing her aspect. She dressed very grandly indeed : with quite lavish magnificence. Such an affluence of silk, satin, velvet, lace, feathers, gold, and gems was never surely seen before clothing one person only. She did not affect youthfulness of presence, except, perhaps, in regard to the glaring dab of vermilion she always wore on either cheek, in imitation, presumably, of girlish bloom. She aimed rather at a look of splendid age, in which decay was admitted but countervailed by profuse decoration.

As I have said, she was hard to please. She was a despot, and chafed at the slightest opposition ; yet obsequious service hardly less offended her. If I addressed her in a tone of meek politeness and deference, she frankly taunted me with

being a toady, a time-server, and a money-grubber. Her vocabulary was rich in depreciatory epithets. If I assumed towards her an air of dignity and self-respect, she flew into a rage, and declared I was trying to ride over her rough-shod. Her change of mood was as sudden as it was frequent. She was a most violent, unreasonable, turbulent sort of woman. Her temper seemed quite uncontrollable, and she was reckless as to what she said or did. It was commonly reported that she had simply talked and stormed and worried the late Mr. Simcox into a premature grave. Her persistence in this respect was said to have even hindered him from making any change in the will he had executed in her favour during the first flush of his honeymoon, before he had fully appraised the moral nature of his bride. So upon his death she took the whole of his estate. And now what would *she* do with it? That was the question in which so many were so vitally concerned.

CHAPTER IV.

I HAD this advantage over my rival relations, settled at the "Red Lion," "Pied Bull," and "Peacock" Inns, Binchester, respectively; I had a friend at court. My aunt's cook and housekeeper, one Mary Grouse, was an old ally of mine. Mrs. Simcox changed her other servants incessantly. I may say that the country round Binchester had been swept far and wide to find her housemaids; but Grouse she resolutely maintained in her service. In fact, she would not let Grouse go on any pretence whatever. Not that they did not quarrel and agree to part very frequently. I believe they gave each other warning regularly every other month or so. For years Grouse was always saying that she could really bear it no longer, that she never knew such a place, that it was impossible

to put up with it; that Missus's temper and goings-on were beyond anything, that it was wearing her to a thread-paper; still she remained in my aunt's household—was not suffered, indeed, to depart. She had, it was said, often packed up her box, given notice to the carrier to call for it, and even opened the street door to go forth, when she had been stopped almost by main force, and constrained to resume her kitchen functions. "You're not going, Grouse," my aunt had said. "You shan't. Unpack your box. I insist upon it. Go downstairs. I've ordered veal cutlets and lamb's fry for dinner, and who's to cook them if you don't? Do you want me to be starved to death? You know I can't eat anybody's cooking but yours. There—keep your temper—don't be ridiculous. And there's that old black silk dress of mine, you may have it if you like: only you must unpick it; I can't have you wearing flounces. Go downstairs to your pots and pans, and don't let me hear any more of this nonsense." My aunt's force of character prevailed, and Grouse still continued in her service.

I had known Grouse from childhood. To her I was always "Master Henry." As a boy, I had won her heart by stealing from my aunt's presence to play cribbage with her in the kitchen. Happily extreme youth is rarely mercenary and calculating. In those days I recked nothing of my aunt's will, though bidden to be on my best behaviour in regard to her. I willingly neglected her for the more exhilarating society of Grouse. She was a sweet-tempered soul, in a portly frame, rubicund of face, bright-eyed, and comely of presence. The kitchen fire seemed to have brought out all her good qualities, much as a hothouse ripens, enriches, and perfects fruit.

I soon found that Mrs. Simcox—for so we all still called her, ignoring her marriage and the existence of the execrable Pounce, her husband—was not to be approached. A state of siege had been proclaimed in the Close, Binchester. Mrs. Simcox had cut off all communication with her relations. I felt that if I ventured near her premises, I was in danger of being shot by her sentries.

Fortunately, quite by chance, "permiscuously" as she described it, I met Grouse just outside the old Gothic gate which separates the Cathedral Close from the High Street, Binchester. Grouse looked old and worn, and woe-begone. For a moment I hardly recognised her.

"Oh, Master Henry," she said, "to think of your being here; at such a time too! Such goings-on as we've had! Enough to turn a body's brain. Yes—married; indeed she is; that I should live to say so. At her time of life! And to take up with Pounce, of all men! There, I wouldn't have believed it of her! And I'm so shaken and put about by it altogether that you might knock me down, there, with a door-key." And she waved before her an instrument of that homely description.

"And who is this man—this scoundrel Pounce?" I demanded of her.

"Don't say that of him, Master Henry, don't," she urged. "Appearances may be against him, and I own myself disappointed in Pounce; but circumstances was trying for him, and he's not

to be called that—not a scoundrel, not quite. He's respectable, is Pounce, though not strong in his mind, perhaps. But he always meant well, I may say that of him, for I've known him this twelve year, almost since he first came to Binchester—for he's not Binchester born: he's a Norfolk man; and I kept company with him for six years. I should know something of his character, and I won't say there's any harm in him. But I never looked for things coming to such a pass as this." Then she told me the story of Mrs. Simcox's marriage.

Pounce had been for some time a lover of Mrs. Grouse's. He was a middle-aged man, of rather obese proportions, lofty of stature, and of lethargic temperament. He thought slowly, and expressed himself with difficulty: his stock of ideas and of words being alike of limited scale. His wooing of Mrs. Grouse seemed to have been conducted after a torpid and dilatory fashion. Still his admiration and his aspirations had at last been expressed with sufficient distinctness. Mrs. Grouse had reciprocated his regard, and had obtained per-

mission for his occasional presence in Mrs. Simcox's kitchen. So the love affair had for some time proceeded in a sufficiently prosaic and stolid way.

"What *is* this man who comes to see you, Grouse?" Mrs. Simcox had inquired one day.

"Please, mum, he's the Water Rates."

"The Water Rates! Bless the man! Show him upstairs the next time he comes. I should like to have a good look at the Water Rates."

So, shortly afterwards, Mr. Pounce, who was one of the collectors employed by the Binchester Imperial Waterworks Company, was brought into the presence of Mrs. Simcox.

"Well, he's a fine figure of a man anyhow," said Mrs. Simcox, "though he does breathe rather hard. Glad to see you, Mr.—Water Rates. What's your name? Take away his hat, Grouse, and open a bottle of sherry."

Pounce was somewhat confused at the inspection to which he was subjected. He suffered from an asthmatic affection, contracted, it was said, during underground labours in connection with

pipes, arising from his official position, and was generally hoarse and short of breath. His hat was an evident inconvenience to him, and its disposition a matter of serious embarrassment; yet relieved of it he seemed not much more at ease, and took to stroking his fat round knees with curious industry. Meanwhile he gazed at Mrs. Simcox with dumb open-mouthed awe.

"And so you want to marry Grouse?" said my aunt.

"Well, mum, if I may be so bold, we were thinking of putting up the bands next Whitsuntide; after I've got the quarter's rates in," replied Mr. Pounce.

"I think it's ridiculous," said Mrs. Simcox. "To think of a Water Rates getting married! I never heard of such a thing. Give him another glass of wine, Grouse."

After this it appeared that Mr. Pounce had very frequently been invited upstairs, to be inspected by Mrs. Simcox, on the occasion of his visits to the Close to see Mary Grouse.

"You don't care for him, Grouse," my aunt

had said one day. "Fiddlestick. You know you don't. Besides, you're a young woman yet, and good-looking when you're dressed. You'll find plenty of lovers. *I* intend to marry Pounce. You must give him up."

And at the next opportunity my aunt actually proposed to Pounce, in the plainest terms, that he should marry her instead of Grouse. It was less, perhaps, a proposal than a command. Pounce was completely overcome. Speech failed him. It seemed that, almost in spite of himself, his consent had been given to the carrying out of this extraordinary arrangement.

"But she must have been out of her mind," I said to Grouse.

"No, Master Henry, I don't think she were; not more than usual. It was partly that she seemed taken with Pounce, and partly that she was jealous, even at her time of life. We're vain to the last, all of us, you know, Master Henry," Grouse observed with a philosophical air. "She was jealous of Pounce caring for me while she was by; and then she wanted to hinder

my leaving her. She couldn't bear the thought of my getting married. Over and over again she's gone on at me about it in the most dreadful way. It's made my blood run cold sometimes to hear her. Then she worried herself to find a plan to hinder me. She found one at last, sure enough."

"It was very hard upon you, Grouse," I said.

"It was indeed, Master Henry. I feel it cruelly at times, I do assure you. I'm not one to whine and fret, I never was; but I really cared for Pounce. He was a quiet, sober, steady man that suited me. I don't blame him. He was, I may say, forced into it. He looked quite dazed like; didn't know what he was doing, it seemed to me. She took him over to the cathedral early one morning, and married him out of hand as I may say. Pounce was never one to have much will of his own if you spoke to him sharp and sudden. I liked him the better for it, though I know that fault was found with him as a collector on that account. People got round him too easy, it was said. But he was generally

liked, was Pounce. I own I liked him." And Grouse sighed, and with a simple air dried her eyes with a corner of her shawl. "It's hard, as you say, to lose such a man. Missus's old dresses and a brooch, and a new bonnet, and a bottle of wine, and what not, is all very well. I don't despise such things; far from it: I was always one to be grateful for kindness; but what's it all worth when you've lost the man you cared for?—nothing, Master Henry, if you'll believe me, not *that*!" And Grouse snapped her fingers loudly.

"Was there any settlement made on the marriage?" I inquired with anxiety.

"Well, I don't rightly know the particulars, Master Henry. But there *were* a deed signed—and Pounce tells me there's a '*nuit*' settled upon him whatever happens."

"And how are things going on now, Grouse?"

"Well, none so pleasant, Master Henry. Missus is sorry, I think, for what she's done, and her ways is at times that fearful, you'd hardly believe me. Maybe the cathedral stones struck a chill

into her at the wedding, and she *would* put on thin shoes that morning; she said that double soles was ridiculous for a bride—anyhow, she's awful changed. She's all of a tremble, at times, and can scarcely stand for weakness. She looks quite strange and scared, and keeps on saying over and over again, 'To think I should have stooped to a Water Rates!' Though, for that matter, Water Rates is a respectable calling enough. And now she can't bear the sight of Pounce. She sends him down to the kitchen for his meals—won't hear of his entering the sitting-room, and once she flew at him on a sudden and slapped his face to that extent you might have heard it all through the Close. She's been the talk of the place, of course—but then she always were that. And Pounce, what with his life indoors and his being called after by the boys in the streets if he ventures to stir out, he finds it trying, I do assure you, Master Henry. But indoors is the worst. She's always flinging the Water Rates in his face—treats him like a dog, as I may say—drives him from her here

and there, as you never saw, Master Henry. Her mind's quite changed in regard to him; and she's ill—really ill. I hardly know what's come to her. She'll take nothing—not even her basin of gruel of nights with a dash of brandy in it, which she's been accustomed to for years. She'll see no one—not even the doctor, nor Quelch the lawyer. How it's all to end, gracious only knows. For Pounce, he's quite beside himself. 'I didn't want to marry her, Mary,' he says to me, with tears in his eyes. He's that cowed and dumfounded and helpless, he might be a sheep. He sits in the kitchen trembling at the sound of her voice. And all the night through he'll stay in the coal-cellar. No, Master Henry, things isn't going pleasantly with us by any means. God bless you, Master Henry, I must go back, now. They'll think I've been all day long marketing." Then she added suddenly, "Look! If there isn't Pounce stealing out. Did ever man look more like a burglar. I can see from this distance that he's all of a shiver. He's out to smoke a pipe under the wall of the Bishop's

gardens. He's fond of his pipe, is Pounce; but missus would throw a pail of water over him as soon as look at him if she caught him smoking."

I had not the heart to say "Serve him right." I said simply, "Poor Pounce!" I think, all things considered, the utterance was really creditable to me.

It was quite clear that no possible good could result from my remaining any longer in Binchester. I could not see my aunt, and had I seen her I don't know that any benefit to any one could have arisen from our meeting. My bill at the "Crown" was considerable, for if they don't know much else, they know how to charge at the "Crown." My relatives at the "Red Lion," "Pied Bull," and "Peacock" Inns had already taken their departure. They had, for the time at any rate, abandoned any hopes they might have nourished with regard to the conciliation of Mrs. Simcox. I determined to go back to London.

I first saw Mr. Quelch, the lawyer, however. But I could elicit nothing from him. Perhaps he had really nothing to tell me. He kept on

saying over and over again, "Pretty goings-on in the Close; pretty goings-on in the Close;" wagged his head from side to side with a curiously significant air, and, as his manner was, took a prodigious quantity of snuff from a great gold box, sneezed obstreperously, and at intervals buried his face in a great flag of silk pocket-handkerchief.

I took the train back to Town. At the moment of departure a tall, stout person entered the carriage. "Mr. Pounce!" I said. He started and turned very pale.

"For Heaven's sake don't betray me!" he cried.

I introduced myself to him as the nephew of his wife.

"I can stand it no longer," he said. He spoke with more volubility than I had expected from him. I think he had lingered in the refreshment-room—availing himself of the accommodation it provided in the way of strong beverages. "I'm a Water Rates, it's true—but I'm a man likewise. It got to be more than flesh and blood could

endure. So, to be plain sir, I've cut and run. That woman, your aunt—you'll excuse my frankness—but there, she ought to be Commander-in-chief, that's what she ought to be!" And throughout our journey he reiterated his opinion that, by rights, Mrs. Simcox should have been Commander-in-chief.

I don't call to mind his saying anything else worthy of record. He seemed to me a feeble creature, of limited intelligence, excited by suffering, and influenced by the supplies of the refreshment-room at Binchester Station.

Quite suddenly news reached her relatives of the demise of Mrs. Simcox—I should say Mrs. Pounce. Great excitement necessarily prevailed. How had she disposed of her property?

Pounce was secure, that was quite clear. He took the annuity with which the marriage settlement endowed him. It was of no large amount, but, under the circumstances, it was sufficient. He, at all events, was well content with it, and, after a decent interval, he married my worthy friend Grouse. He resumed his post as collector

of the water rates at Binchester, and seems to have given satisfaction' to his employers and to the inhabitants of the town generally by the way in which he discharged his duties.

Mrs. Simcox's will was found to be a very extraordinary document. It was all in her own handwriting, and was evidently founded upon the provisions of wills and codicils drawn up for her from time to time by Mr. Quelch. It was very long, confused in its expressions, and often strangely contradictory. Necessarily it has formed the subject of an elaborate, intricate, and severely-contested Chancery suit. Hitherto it has greatly benefited the lawyers, and no one else, so far as I can ascertain. Certainly I have received nothing; and as I can see what is called the "Fund in Court" melting away like a snowball in a thaw, my hopes in regard to profit from it diminish with a rapidity very painful to reflect upon.

THE END.

*Crown Buildings, 188, Fleet Street,
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